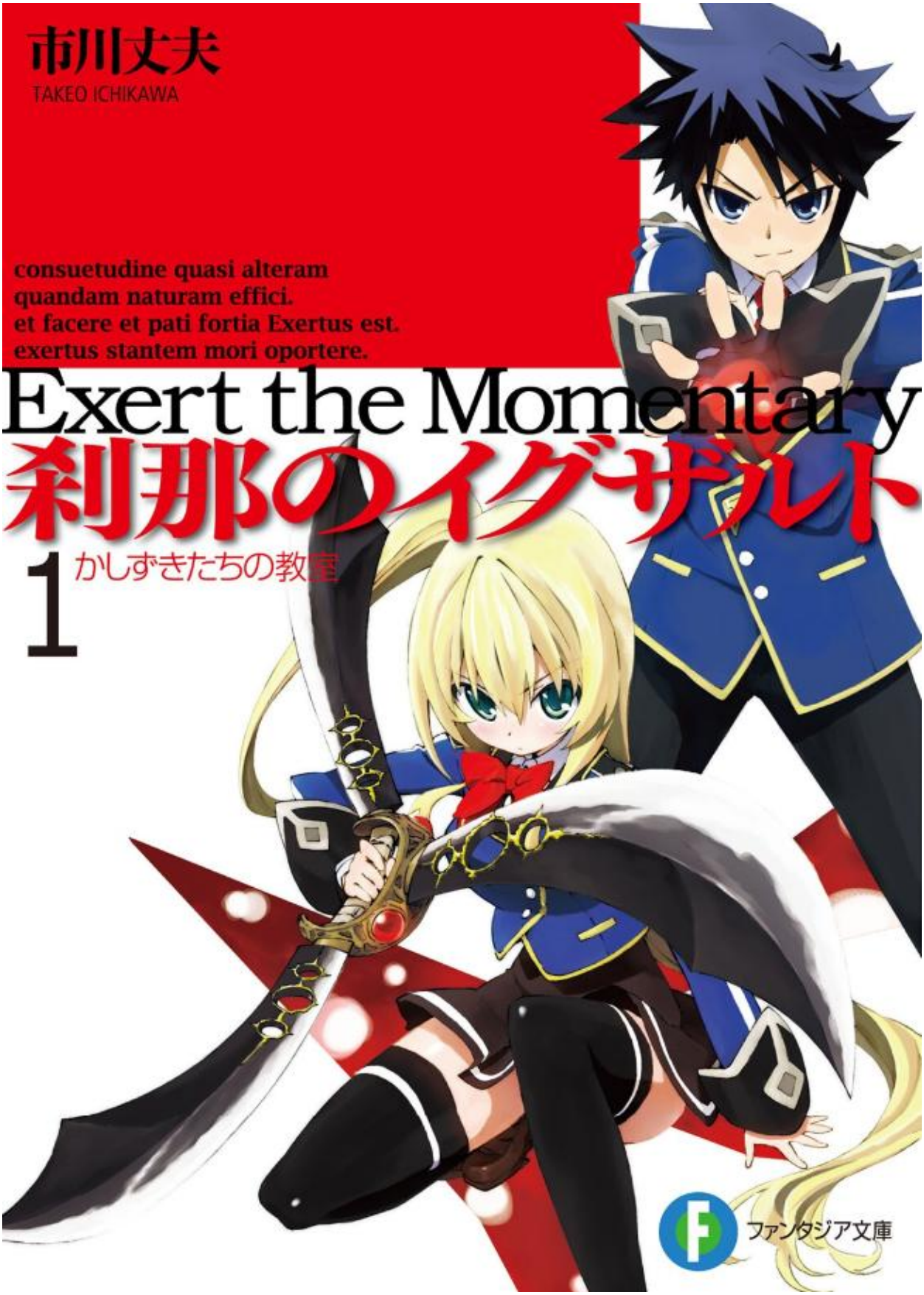

Translation by NineSoulsSea
Special Thanks to aNobody101

Takeo Ichikawa
● Takeo Ichikawa
Born February 7. Aquarius, blood type O. Born and raised in Ichikawa City, Chiba Prefecture. Hobbies include non-battery-powered analog games and walking. Recently, I walked across the Tokyo Bay Rainbow Bridge promenade, but the sheer height and strong winds made my legs go weak...

Exert the Momentary 1

Takeo Ichikawa

Fujimi Fantasia Bunko

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【Intro.Phase: The Prisoner's Dilemma】

What happened back then? For the past three years, that's all I've been asking myself. The psychotherapists gathered from all over the world have been repeating the same questions. Or perhaps I should call it an interrogation.

"You still haven't remembered, have you? If you can just recall those two seconds, you can return to the world."

"Let's not make any promises, Doctor. The chances of him reintegrating into society are slim."

"You really should stop struggling."

"You caused an accident like that. There's no way you can fight."

I resisted those piercing words. But no matter how hard I tried to remember, nothing came to mind. It was just two seconds in time - but from that moment of blankness, my life changed.

Please. Someone, tell me. Why did I kill an innocent person? The person most important to me...

"Come out, Prisoner Number VH-5150." Suddenly, I was called by a mechanical voice. Dragging the cold weight of the Metal restraints on my neck and both hands, I walked out of the cell.

I was led into a circular hall. There were no windows, and the ceiling was so high I couldn't see it. I stopped in the center of the dark hall.

"What's this all about? Summoning me all of a sudden..." As I asked, a spotlight illuminated the hall. The sound of hard footsteps approached. The man in sunglasses who appeared gave a polite nod.

"It's been a while, Young Master."

"That's unusual."

"I hear you've been serving your sentence with exemplary behavior."

"You're even asking about my conduct in prison?"

"The 'Divine Mind' sees all."

"I see... So? Why did you go out of your way to visit me?"

Then, once again, a mechanical voice echoed from the ceiling."You are to be released, VH-5150."

"Huh...?" An unexpected announcement. At the same time, my restraints came loose on their own and fell to the floor. I rubbed my wrists as I looked up at the ceiling. "You've got to be kidding me."

"This is no joke."

"No matter how I look at it, this doesn't make any sense. Are you out of your mind, releasing me?"

Then the mechanical voice boomed out again. "Indeed. We haven't even figured out why you committed the crime. There's a very real possibility of a repeat offense."

"Then why?"

'The situation on the battlefield has worsened.' Along with that voice... my surroundings changed completely.

All around me was a city in flames. Skyscrapers blazed like pillars of fire, and black smoke blanketed the sky. Elevated highways lay shattered, and countless cars lay wrecked. Destruction as far as the eye could see. But in the very next instant, countless fireballs rained down from the sky. Before I could even dodge, they struck. A violent shockwave that seemed capable of shattering the earth. Then, a wall of flames erupted, and a scorching wind swept over me. But I refused to yield to the searing heat and raised my head. Looking up at the sky, I saw thousands of enemies.

Enemies all too familiar to us.

The Tokyo Tower crumbled. Then, countless strings of text flashed around me.

"January 18th, Minato Ward, Tokyo: Disaster. Entire Shiba Park contaminated."

"January 10th, Chubu Centrair International Airport: Disaster. Entire area contaminated."

"March 8th, Minato Ward and Konohana Ward, Osaka: Disaster. Entire Osaka Port contaminated."

"March 16, Kamigyo Ward, Kyoto City • Affected • Entire Kyoto Imperial Palace contaminated"

In sync with the text, the surrounding scenery changed rapidly. But Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto had all been reduced to desolate ruins. Eventually, a massive world map appeared in me field of vision. Most of it — namely, the eastern halves of North and South America, the Australian continent, all of Siberia, the nations of Southeast Asia, and the southern, were blacked out. Moreover, that darkness had spread across the sea and reached Japan as well.

"...So, they've come to Japan too?"

"That's right, VH-5150... no, now that I've released you, I should call you by your original name: 'Arrogant Strategist'."

"It's been three years since I've been called that."

"You are the man who defeated countless enemies and, at just twelve years old, achieved a certified kill count of 100. Above all, you bear the title of 'Savior of the Holy Land.' Rather than keeping you imprisoned indefinitely, it is in Japan's best interest to return you to the front lines."

"Ah, I see. Even if I were to cause trouble again... you figured I'd achieve far greater results than the cost of that sacrifice."

"Correct. It seems you haven't lost your edge."

"I hate flattery."

"Besides, your conduct while incarcerated has been exemplary, and your contribution to society through prison labor has been significant. Now go back and save your homeland." With that, the armored shutter opened, revealing the exit to the outside world.

As I stepped out, I found myself surrounded by a vast snowfield. I raised my hand to shield myself from the howling snowstorm. It was unseasonable weather for Antarctica in March. But despite the biting cold, I took a deep breath.

"I'm going home... to Japan..."

As I muttered this, the man in sunglasses also stepped out onto the snowfield. "Young Master... Thank you for your service."

Once I stepped out, I was surrounded by a vast snowfield. Despite the biting cold, I took a deep breath. "I can go home, to Japan..." As I muttered this, the man in sunglasses also stepped out onto the snowy plain. "Young master... Thank you for your service."

"Ah... yeah."
"Aren't you happy?"
"I guess I am, sort of."
"It doesn't look like it."
I ran my hand over my face. That's strange. I should be happy, but my face feels stiff. It's definitely not just the cold. As if to hide it, I turned my face away. "I'm worried. I wonder if it's okay to go back to the real world..."
"...Don't worry about it too much."
"..."

"The entrance ceremony?"
"As soon as you return, there'll be an entrance ceremony."
"Yes. Young master, you will be a first-year high school student starting next month. I've arranged a good school for you."
"Me... a high school student?" Oh, right. I'd completely forgotten that I'm fifteen. After all, since I couldn't even attend middle school, school life is a completely unknown world to me. Besides, I... "Hey, do I really have to enroll?"
"This is an order from the Commander-in-Chief."
"You are aware of how I behave, though, right?"
"I am well aware. After all, you're the 'Lone Wolf'."
"Yeah. I'm just not good with people."
"If you have any objections, please speak directly to the Commander-in-Chief."
"...Uh... No, well, that's..." I fell into a helpless silence. No good. If I defy my father, even as his own son...
But I turned my gaze toward Yukiarashi. I have something I must do. There is a truth I must uncover. But how can I reach that truth...? I stood there staring at Yukiarashi for a moment. Then, the system voice called out again.
"I forgot to mention this. Even after your release, you are forbidden from speaking of the Gankuchi No. 9 Incident to anyone."
"I figured as much."
"The Gankuchi No. 9 Incident is still under investigation. If you leak the secret... then your punishment won't be limited to just imprisonment here."
...So that's how it is, then. Even after I leave prison, I'll still be carrying this guilt - and I'm not allowed to tell anyone about it. But it's definitely a past I must never forget.
Then, the mechanical voice suddenly softened. "Once you've regained your memory, tell me. That will be your true atonement... and the world is waiting for the truth."
Yeah, I thought as much. But before that, can someone tell me? Where are the two seconds that the world and I lost?

【Phase.1: Return to a Spring Overflowing with Life】

I think everyone gets nervous at entrance ceremonies. Seeing the school building for the first time, meeting teachers and classmates for the first time... When you think about spending three years in this place, at first, anxiety is bound to be stronger.

But I was overcome by terrible drowsiness. "Haaaaaaaaa..." I was yawning in the corner of the classroom. After all, I'd just returned home last night. My jet lag was mild, but now that I'd been released, both my mind and body were relaxed. On top of

that, my seat was in the very back by the window. Spring sunlight poured in, and the gentle breeze felt pleasant. It was warm enough to make my body — which had spent three years in Antarctica — feel like it was melting. I heard the war situation was worsening... It's strangely peaceful here.

I just waited patiently for the class orientation to end. I managed to get through the entrance ceremony, which was held in the gym, without a hitch. Even after entering the classroom for Class 1-A, I've already gotten the tedious self-introductions out of the way. Though I feel like I just said my name and called it a day. That said, I can't remember any of my classmates' names at all, and the female homeroom teacher's name didn't even register in my ears. I guess it can't be helped. I don't even feel like I'm really back in the country yet.

I let my gaze drift blankly out the window. This city, Nishihama, is located in the suburbs of Tokyo. It's about an hour from the city center on the Keinan Main Line. Facing Tokyo Bay, it's a new residential area lined with high-rise apartments. The private Sakurano Line, which runs inland, also serves the area, and the population is nearly 500,000. If you walk up the hill in front of the station, you'll find a row of cherry trees in full bloom. At the top of that hill is my high school: Nishihama Gakuen High School.

Mind you, I only received the admissions brochure early this morning and didn't have time to read it properly. I didn't even choose the school myself; I just enrolled because Senzaki recommended it. I have almost no idea what kind of high school it actually is. It's a completely passive decision to enroll, isn't it?

But there's something weird about this school. I'd been feeling a sense of unease about the school grounds for a while now. The main building stands in the center of the campus, with the grounds spreading out around it. Plus, the grounds are unusually vast.

Maybe sports clubs are really popular here? Well, it's a hassle anyway, so I'm not joining any clubs. Anyway, since I've been away from Japan for three years, I'm completely out of touch with current events. If my friends bring up TV dramas or actresses, I probably won't have a clue what they're talking about. Professional baseball? Soccer? Miss me...

I guess that's to be expected. I've always been like that, anyway. I'm not the type to go out of my way to stay up on current events. But shouldn't I try to keep up with the latest topics to fit in at school? Hmm, I don't really feel like forcing myself, though. More importantly, will I be able to keep up with the classes? I mean, I didn't even go to middle school, you know?

As I was thinking things like that, the female teacher finally finished speaking. "That's all for today. Please make the most of your school life starting tomorrow."

Ah, it's finally over. I immediately tried to leave the classroom. Just being in the same room as forty other people made me feel uncomfortable. I guess I really can't get used to group life. But just as I was about to stand up, the female teacher flashed a strangely cheerful smile.

"Well, it's almost twelve o'clock. Are you ready? Then, the countdown begins... 1098..."

I tilted my head in confusion. What's with this countdown? But ignoring my bewilderment, an eerie tension began to fill the classroom.

"...3, 2, 1, 0! First-year scouting is now open!"

Scouting is open? What's that? Did I just miss something incredibly important? To put it dramatically, something that could determine the course of my life... The moment I realized that, my classmates turned around and started running straight toward me.

"W-w-what the hell?!" My drowsiness vanished in an instant.

My classmates were kicking over desks and chairs, charging at me with desperate expressions. No, it wasn't just my classmates. Even the upperclassmen who had been waiting in the hallway joined the rampage, making the floor shake. Their number? Roughly two hundred... It felt like waking up on the African savanna only to be charged by a herd of zebras. That's how serious everyone's faces were, their eyes bloodshot.

And on top of that, all two hundred students suddenly called out my name. "Ryoto Ugajin!"

"Y-yes?" I... Ryoto Ugajin, timidly raised my right hand. Even though I had absolutely no idea what was going on, everyone simultaneously... asked me.

"Please, join our club!"

"No way, join mine!"

"Hold on, I'm first! Join mine!"

Join? Could this be a club? So they're really putting effort into sports clubs after all? But this recruitment is way too desperate for that. But then, the upperclassmen suddenly pulled out thick wads of cash!

"How about a 20 million yen signing bonus, Ugajin-kun?"

"Wait, we'll offer you a 30 million yen signing bonus!"

"With us, you'll get a 40 million yen signing bonus plus a brand-new condo!"

"50 million yen signing bonus and a hot spring villa in Izu!"

"60 million yen and I'll go out on a date with you! I'm very sexy if you ask me!"

"70 million yen and you can go out on a date with me! I'm very muscular and ripped!"

The price rose by the second, and the classroom turned into an auction house. It was just like an auction for a painting — or perhaps the finest, marbled Matsusaka beef, graded A5... I finally plucked up the courage to ask. "...Is this some kind of prank?"

A second later, a wave of laughter rippled through the room. Two seconds later, the bidding resumed.

"80 million yen + a date with my D-cup older sister! Here's a photo of her in a swimsuit!"

"90 million yen + a date with my five-year-old little sister! Here's a photo of her!"

The amounts my seniors were shouting were far beyond what high school students could freely afford. Yet some opened their attaché cases and flashed tens of millions in cash.

Soon, the bizarre self-introductions began.

"I am Kondou Yuuji of the 32nd Batto Gakuto-tai! Esteemed Ugajin Ryoto, please join our squad!"

"I am Tsuchimikado Shizuka of the 74th Onmyo Gakuto-tai. May all good stars gather, and all evil stars disperse... Please join our venerable squad."
"I am Torao Tetsuyama of the 101st Heavy Tank Battle Squad. With you, the Knight's Cross with Sword and Oak Leaves is no mere dream. Come work with us!"
Battle Squad? What's that? What do you mean by "work"?
Meanwhile, my classmates stepped in to block the upperclassmen.
"Seniors, that's cheating!"
"Don't try to bribe Ugajin with money!"
"Don't be swayed, Ugajin! And for the sake of our class bond, team up with me!"
"Don't cut in line! Besides, Ugajin, as your classmate, I look forward to working with you from now on..." She then puffed her ample chest, showing off.
"That's cheating with your sex appeal! Fine, then I'll give you a kiss too."
"Ugajin, my little sister is terminally ill and doesn't have much time left... I just really wanted her to see us teaming up..."
"We promised a long time ago, didn't we, Ugajin-kun? Under that tree, that we'd team up together in the future... Oh, wait, is this our first time meeting?"
S-so these are my classmates... This one, unlike my seniors, doesn't have any money, but he seems determined to overcome that handicap by any means necessary. I mean, don't you guys have any rules? Anyway, everyone was acting so desperate that if I were to ask, "What even is the Student Council?" at this point, I'd probably get torn to pieces along with a barrage of insults. No, I'm serious!
I don't know, but I can't ask. I frantically racked my brain, trying to figure out how to get through this crisis.
"Um, I, well..." The 200 people fell silent, holding their breath as they listened to my words. But my mind was spinning. My head was gradually going blank.
What should I do... what should I dooooo... But just as I started seriously considering escaping through the window, a woman's voice rang out from somewhere.
"Wait. It's not that easy to pull him out of here." In an instant, the crowd parted with a rush, and a female student emerged like Moses.
She had a slender build. Her posture, with her uniform worn crisply, exuded a pedigree. Her hair, flowing down to her shoulders, was loosely curled, and she waved at me with a dazzling smile. "Ryo-chan, it's been a while."
"Ryo-chan?" The moment she called my name, memories from my childhood came flooding back.
"You... Yuri... Mirokuji Yuri?"
"That's right. I just introduced myself, didn't I?"
"I'm surprised — we were in Class A together? It's been a while... Yure...'" Just as I started to say it, Yuri gently covered my mouth with her palm.
"You're not allowed to say that, Ryo-chan!"
"Ah... let me go..."
"You know damn well I hate that name with a passion!" Ah, right. I remember getting scolded like this over and over when I was a kid. "But why are you even at this school? Your family home is in Setagaya, Tokyo, isn't it? It's only natural to go to a school in your local district..."

"Well, I heard you were coming back."
"From who?"
"Mr. Sensaki from your house."
"That guy, blabbing away..."
"When I heard that... I just wanted to go to the same high school as Ryo-chan." Her voice was innocent and sweet. Her eyes, shining like jewels, were fixed straight on me. But...
I'm not good at situations like this. How should I act... Yuri and I had played together since childhood because our families were close, and we'd even trained together. But after so long...
The Yuri I met again had become surprisingly beautiful. Traces of her old self remained, but she somehow seemed like a different person. Whether she sensed my confusion or not, Yuri was smiling brightly.
"Ryo-chan, look at me."
"I-I don't want to..."
"What's wrong? It's been three years... Anyway, you've really grown, Ryo-chan."
"..."
"And you've gotten so handsome."
"....."
"But maybe you should smile more."
"....."
"Also, your hair's too long." Yuri's fingers ran through my hair. Her mature sigh made me instinctively step back.
"W-wait, not here...!" After all, two hundred people were watching- and it was my first day of school. Before they started teasing me, I had to escape through the window this time...
But the reaction around me defied my expectations once again.
"They're hereeeee!"
"The top two most popular new student recruits have arrived!"
"Mirokuji-san, sorry I didn't recruit you first! But after I sweet-talked Ugajin-kun, I was planning to ask you right away!"
"Starting at 20 million yen for Mirokuji-san too!"
"30 million!"
"40 million!"
"50 million!"
This time, it was Yuri's signing bonus that skyrocketed. But she herself remained completely unfazed, turning to face the 200 people.
"Everyone, don't panic. Ryo-chan has just returned from a serious injury after three years, so he can't decide right away which Gakuto Squad to join."
...Ah, so that's how it is. For the first time, I realized I'd been lying about my own background. Indeed, what happened three years ago was treated as a gagging incident. Since the Nine Generals who rule this world were involved in the cover-up, there's no way anyone — not even a childhood friend — would know about it.

But Yuri, completely oblivious, continued. "Ryo-chan is very picky. We plan to try out a trial enlistment first and then decide where to go. For now, maybe you should focus on securing other new recruits." The moment she made that declaration, the area was filled with screams and shouts.

"Emergency notice! Contracts with Ryoto Uga and Yuri Mirokuji are on hold!"

"This was unexpected! Immediately contact all new students ranked third or lower in popularity!" A crowd of two hundred people burst out of the classroom like a stampede.

Apparently heading toward other students, they got in each other's way, and eventually, it escalated into a massive brawl.

"Get out of the way, Masuo Oyama of the 26th Karate Combat Squad!"

"You wanna fight, Da-ryong Lee of the 38th Martial Arts Combat Squad? I'm not handing over Class 1-B's promising new student to you!"

I could only stare blankly at that epic game of one-upmanship. "What is this school...?"

Yuri chuckled softly at my groan. "This is Nishihama Gakuen High School. Hey, can we be alone for a moment?"

"Uh, yeah..."

Yuri clasped her hands behind her back and skipped out into the hallway. Her mature demeanor, combined with the never-ending chaos, left me with an indescribable sense of dissonance.

This is Japan after three years. Is this really my assigned high school?

We got to the school rooftop. I sat down on a bench and chugged a can of coffee. Ugh, this is awful. To call this stuff "coffee" is nothing short of fraud. Seeing my bitter expression, Yuri gave me a sympathetic look. "You're still as picky about coffee as ever."

"Well, yeah... so, what exactly is a 'Gakutai'?"

"Huh? That's what you wanted to start with?"

"...Yeah, let's start with that."

Admitting my ignorance, Yuri crossed her arms. "You're hopeless. To have entered this school without knowing anything... Well, never mind. Basically, 'Gakutai' refers to student combatants. This here Nishihama Academy is a high school dedicated to training Gakuto."

"So, the students here are..."

"They're users just like us. Though most of them are inexperienced trainees — in other words, beginners who've only mastered Level 1 spells."

"I've never heard of a high school like that before."

"It can't be helped. The war situation worsened, and the mobilization of Gakuto began three years ago... right around the time you were hospitalized." Yuri's hair fluttered in the spring breeze. A faint, sweet scent tickled my nostrils. "What's more, these student warriors aren't just training — they're authorized to participate in actual combat. At this high school, classes are secondary... everyone has formed combat squads and is fighting."

"Deploying high school student warriors into actual combat? That's practically sending them to their deaths for nothing."

"Well, Japan has finally become a battlefield in the Anomaly War. As a result, our human resources are running low... Honestly, we've been pushed to the point where we have to mobilize minors."

I'd read the news on the flight back home. Even as the fighting intensified over the past hundred years, Japan had remained safe, protected by the seas on all sides. But the enemy, having swallowed up regions across the globe, has finally landed in Japan. They're inflicting catastrophic damage on urban areas and are trying to establish a sphere of influence. What's more, they're threatening oil import routes from the Middle East, putting the lives of the people in crisis...

Yuri's voice was tinged with resignation. "The territorial factions alone can't protect Japan anymore. That's why factions across the country have started."

"So basically, they're just filling in the gaps... But man, the factions these days are a joke. Can't they even protect their own territories without borrowing high schoolers' help?"

"Yeah. But even if it's just four or five Trainees forming a Gakuto Squad, they can still achieve decent results. And for those results, the requesting faction pays a reward."

My sense of unease grew even stronger. It seemed that while I'd been away for three years, the world had completely changed. That guy, Senzaki — just what kind of high school did he get me into? No. For someone like me who skipped middle school, it might actually be perfect.

Yuri pointed further across the schoolyard. "That's why everyone's desperate to recruit talented first-years into their Gakuto Teams. If you achieve greater results, the rewards are higher, and you can get a job with a good faction with a good salary, apparently."

Sure enough, looking down at the schoolyard, I could see the Gakuto Teams surrounding the new first-years.

"So, that means those guys are..."

"Yep, the other freshmen are being recruited too. Everyone's combat ability is listed in the freshman roster." As I glanced down at the roster, Yuri pointed to the schoolyard again. "Ryo, you should read that too and at least memorize your classmates' names. Look, that guy with brown hair over there is Inzai. The one who's pretty cute and surrounded by upperclassmen is Okuzono. Then there's Kozuki-kun, Endo-san, Morikita-san, Kamata-kun..."

I desperately followed the tip of Yuri's finger, matching it to the roster. Grr... memorizing the names and faces of forty people... is actually pretty tough...

Unaware of my confusion, Yuri pointed her finger at me. "But Ryo-chan, you're the most popular freshman. Everyone knows how active you were before your injury, too. 'The Savior of the Holy Land...'"

I tossed the empty coffee can into the trash can. Damn, I missed. Reluctantly, I stood up from the bench and dropped the can I'd picked up into the trash can.

Then Yuri took a step closer. "What have you been doing these past three years... You never once got in touch."

"I'm sorry... I've been doing nothing but rehab."

"I see... What about Sakurano?"

"I haven't gone back. I haven't even shown my face at the Uga family home."
"That can't be... ....even though you were discharged from the hospital."
I could only respond with silence. It pained me to keep lying to Yuri, who didn't know the truth. Looking west, my hometown was faintly visible in the distance. A small, undeveloped mountain town when compared to Nishihama City. Its only claim to fame was its long history and the cherry blossoms along the moat... Yes, surely by now...
Yuri peered at my confused face. "So, Ryo-chan, where do you live now?"
"I rented an apartment in front of Nishihama Station."
"You're a high school student living alone in an apartment? Where did you get the money for that?"
"Well, various things."
"And you didn't even tell your parents?"
"I'm very independent."
"You're still as 'arbitrary and cunning' as ever. But..." Yuri's nose twitched in response. "...Hehe, I might actually be a little happy about that." In that instant, Yuri's fingers wrapped around my left hand. It was a natural movement. As if to convey her body heat, she squeezed my hand.
"That apartment of yours... maybe I should pay you a visit."
Suddenly, my heart began to race. I was flustered to a degree that even I found pathetic. Could it be that Yuri had thrown a curveball into my heart? But I didn't know if I should throw it back... or hit it back. I think she's become beautiful, and we've known each other for a long time. Is that why she wants to go to my place? Like I could accept something like that. We just reunited, after all...
In the end, all I could do was frantically shake off Yuri's hand. "W-well, that's not right, is it? You're not my girlfriend or anything." Even I wondered if that was the right thing to say. But Yuri's face transformed like a demon's... Oh no, looks like I gave the worst possible wrong answer.
"Ryo-chan... Just to make things clear..." It felt like the earth quaked from her killing intent.
"No, do we really need to make it clear?"
"Listen, Ryo-chan! Do you have any idea how worried I've been these past three years?!"
"G-gasp... d-don't choke me!"
"Anyway, Ryo-chan..."
My consciousness began to fade under Yuri's sleeper hold, and my screams reached my classmates out on the schoolyard.
"Hmm, it's Ugajin and Mirokuji-san up on the roof!"
"They're already making out on the first day of school!"
"And Mirokuji-san is trying to pin him down!"
"Wow, she's really going for it!!"
"Ah, I'm getting a nosebleed..."
"Pull yourself together! Don't die on your first day of school!"
I shouted at the crowd of first-year Class A students swarming toward us. "No! Yuri is just a childhood friend and..."

"What do you mean 'just a childhood friend'?! Huh?!"
"Anyway, calm down! First, calm down!"
But when I pushed Yuri's hand away...
...the world warped.
A tremor unlike an earthquake. The air pressure dropped, and something hot poured into my ears.
"Ryo-chan, this..." Just as Yuri realized it, a violent tremor struck.

The row of cherry trees leading from the school's main gate. The pavement suddenly began to boil and exploded with a deafening roar. It was like a volcanic eruption... But what spewed forth was not red lava, but a pitch-black tsunami.

"That's—!" Before I could finish my scream, the black tsunami crashed into Nishihama Academy. The outer walls twisted grotesquely the moment they were engulfed. The entire surface was covered in viscera-like characters, warping and contorting, undulating endlessly. An unreal distortion that throws the viewer's vestibular system into chaos.

"Deep Erosion..." My back teeth ground together. But this is reality, and it is also the everyday life of this world. It is a phenomenon where an alternate world, known as the "Anomaly," tears through the dimensional barrier and erodes the human world.

And it is by no means rare. Since ancient times, Deep Erosion has occurred in various parts of the world, transforming those lands into "Anomalies." And over the past hundred years, Deep Erosion has increased rapidly, already claiming most of the Earth as its own. The Anomaly War has now begun at Nishihama Academy as well.

"Deep Erosion Alert! Deep Erosion Alert! Non-combat students, evacuate to the school building immediately! Combat students, await further orders!" The school intercom blared out the shrill warning. But the schoolyard was already engulfed in panic.

"Is it even possible to be in actual combat on our first day of school?"

"What can we do? But what should we do?"

"Sorry! I'm a non-combatant, so I'm in the evacuation group!"

Students running in panic collided with one another, letting out screams. But then, the school intercom shouted again.

"Anomalous Attack Risk Level A detected. Nishihama Academy, First-Class Combat Deployment."

First-Class Combat Deployment?! I couldn't believe my ears, and immediately doubted my eyes as well. Suddenly, the outer walls surrounding the school rose up, glowing with a blue light. Not only that, but the schoolyard began to rise and fall, revealing an outer moat and creating several arrow-shaped sections.

"Hey, this school isn't normal!"

"Yeah, didn't you know?" Yuri held her hand up to the flash of light covering the school building. "This place is also known as Nishihama Kyuryokaku! It's one of the top military bases in South Kanto, built to repel the Deep Corrosion!" As she shouted, the school transformed into a fortress with nine bastions. It was like Hakodate's Goryokaku, but even more jagged... truly, Kyuryokaku. Furthermore, the blue lightning enveloping the school— the defensive arts of the Guardian — mercilessly scorched the Deep Corrosion's vent. Screaming, the Deep Corrosion retreated.

However, the portion of the Deep Corrosion that had already entered the schoolyard continued to slither forward, even after being severed from the vent, advancing at a furious rate. Despite having a radius of several dozen meters, it swallowed everyone up in the blink of an eye.

"Aaaah!"

"Help me.....!"

There was no time to resist. Just like being swept away by a real tsunami, dozens of students sank into the slime. I could see only their limbs thrashing, and soon even those were drowning in the pitch-black mass. And so many of my classmates from Class 1-A were among them...

The moment I saw that, I had already thrown off my jacket. I'm going to save them now! Even if I'm alone! I felt no fear. The Deep Corrosion was a familiar enemy. I'd fought it hundreds of times since I was a child. Even though it had been three years since I last encountered them, my body instinctively tried to fight. That was the combat reflex hammered into me through blood-spitting training... or so it should have been.

But my body was frozen stiff. What bound me was the three years of scorn I had endured. The voice of the psychotherapist resurfaced, clinging to my limbs like a crawling insect.

"You really shouldn't fight anymore. If something happens this time, you might die. There's no one left to protect you. Besides, your skills have deteriorated after a three-year hiatus. It's smarter not to fight."

That last line tied my limbs in place. It's smarter not to fight. It's smarter not to fight. It's smarter not to fight. Ah, maybe you're right.

A smart guy would just go quietly into the school building. I should just wait in a safe place for this to blow over. Everyone swallowed up by the Deep Corrosion will surely be saved by someone. This isn't my jurisdiction, and I don't need to fight.

Silence.

Indifference.

Nothingness.

I get it. I get it all. But I...

I should stop fucking around. You think it's smarter not to fight. Remember who you are. I was born to protect others. I've trained to protect others. I came back to protect others. Then...!

I don't care if they call me foolish. I wanted to fight. I wanted to use the power that had been doubted and denied for three years to prove that I am who I am.

But what if I cause another accident? Then I'll just die. This time, I really will just die. That's far better than not fighting at all! The moment I made up my mind, the restraints vanished.

"Ryoto Ugajin!"

The students stood dumbfounded at the sight of the confrontation. Even though they were merely trainees, they had all studied combat against the Deep Corrosion. They knew how terrifying it was.

The Deep Corrosion was not ignorant. The moment it sensed the presence of a Domain Master, it would attack with full force, devouring its prey while simultaneously crushing its bones and flesh. Moreover, the Deep Corrosion before them spanned a radius of dozens of meters — it was impossible to believe I could handle it alone. Furthermore, numerous students had been swallowed up inside the Deep

Corrosion. Hostages, so to speak. If I launched a direct attack, I would end up taking them down with the Anomaly.

"...That's reckless."

"...It's foolish."

"Come back, Ugajin!"

"Don't you value your life, you fool!"

"I suppose he doesn't, does he?"

But behind the students, the click-clack of high heels approached. The students turned around. The woman in heels smiled with her red lips. "Once upon a time... in a certain place, there was a skinny little boy. He was only ten years old. That boy had participated as a Domain Warrior in the operation to retake Jerusalem, which had been attacked by the Anomalies. All the other Domain Warriors slew the Anomaly enemies and earned a reputation for their valor. But for some reason, that boy alone had zero kills."

"..."

"That's because he encountered 500 civilians who had fled to Hezekiah's underground tunnels, and — ignoring the order to fight and eliminate the Anomalies — he made sure that every single one of them escaped safely." The homeroom teacher of Class 1-A continued. "Taking responsibility for disobeying orders, he didn't report any kills. But in reality, while escorting the civilians to safety, he was surrounded by countless enemies. He fought alone until the last civilian had escaped, annihilating the enemy. The number of kills from that battle is reported to be either 46 or 58. If it had been officially recognized, I wonder how many kills he would have now." Then, the teacher pointed at her student. "That's the kind of person he is. If it means saving someone, he'll ignore orders and risk his own life without a second thought... Since then, he's come to be known by two titles. The 'Arrogant Tactician' and the 'Savior of the Holy Land,' Ryoto Ugajin."

* * *

▼Many hostages inside the Deep Corrosion. Rescue is the top priority.

▼▼Area-of-effect annihilation spells: prohibited.

Sensor enhancement. Confirming the hostages' locations. My senses and thoughts were racing. But I had already decided which spell to cast.

"I hope this works...!" I extended my palm toward the pitch-black void. Domain particles converged at my fingertips, burning with intense heat. Then the particles compressed... and the spell was activated. What I unleashed from my arm was a Level 3 Area-of-Effect Annihilation Spell: "Malthus's Circle of Condemnation". The strike raced toward the Deep Corrosion and collided head-on. A deafening roar of recoil. The school building shook.

"Gahhhhh...!"

The recoil energy surged back into my body. Dizziness and nausea. My hair stood on end, and the pressure was so intense I could barely stand... But enduring this is what makes me a Domain Master.

My "Malthus's Circle of Condemnation" bit into the Deep Erosion and split left and right at a terrifying speed. Outpacing the Deep Erosion's spread, it now traces the edges of the Deep Erosion, which has reached a radius of 100 meters. The Deep Corrosion was then halted by the spell and could no longer spread further. The seething darkness bubbled as if struggling, left stranded. Meanwhile, my spell completely encircled the Deep Corrosion and converged upon it. A ring of black lightning... the circle was truly complete.

But a terrifying scream was also bursting from my mouth. "Gaaaaaah!" The Deep Corrosion's resistance intensified. My limbs felt like they were being torn apart, and the pain was so intense it felt like my brain was boiling. Even so, I focused my consciousness and unleashed the Domain Factors all at once.

Destroy it! Destroy it! Destroy it! DESTROYYYYYY!!!

Soon, a deafening roar. A high-speed shockwave spread outwards. It struck the students watching from within the school as well.

"Aaaargh!"

"Eeeek!"

For a moment, the area was shrouded in dust, and nothing could be seen. One minute... two minutes... silence reigned. When the spring breeze returned, the scene finally came into view. The Deep Corrosion was already gone without a trace, and the rescued students lay scattered on the ground. I deactivated the two spells that had triggered automatically. A small sense of relief washed over me, but a heavy feeling of exhaustion also weighed down on my body.

My first real battle in three years. I've definitely gotten rusty.

No matter how much I tried to catch my breath, the fatigue wouldn't fade. That's how much this first battle in so long had taken its toll.

I never used to get this tired. Damn it, if only I hadn't had that hiatus... I would have gotten stronger by now. Three years I can't get back, no matter how much I regret it. But I felt a little relieved. It seems I can still fight as a Domain Master.

"Danger Level of Anomalous Attack Reduced to D. Nishihama Academy, First-Class Combat Deployment Canceled"

The blue light on the castle walls... "Guardian". The defensive spell was fading. As the fortress instantly returned to the school building, I helped a classmate who was about to collapse back to their feet.

"Are you okay? Um... Kamitsuki?"

"Yeah... uh, Ugajin? Did you save me?"

"Mm... Is Morikita-san okay too?"

"Ah, thank you..."

"You should just rest for now."

Then Komatsu and Endo-san sat up as well, letting out sighs of relief.

"W-wow, that was a shock... I thought I was going to die."

"But Uga-kun, you really are strong... To defeat that Deep Corrosion all by yourself..."

Not knowing how to respond, I looked away. Then, Yuri came into view. She, too, was holding a pure white spell light over the rescued students. First-level "Spiritual

Life" Anomaly Healing spell, "Buel's Gentle Hand" As the spell of Buel, the Commander of Healing, was cast, the students began to wake up, one by one.

Yuri gave them a gentle smile. "It's okay, there are no external injuries. I've also removed the effects of the Deep Corrosion... You'll feel a little queasy for a while, but you'll be fine soon."

Seeing her like that felt strangely nostalgic. Yuri had always been skilled in healing magic, and she'd often healed my injuries back in the day. As the siren of the school ambulance drew closer, Yuri walked over to me.

"Good work, Ryo-chan."

"Yeah, you too."

"Actual combat... it's been three years, hasn't it?"

"...Mm."

"Seems you've stil got it, though." Yuri pointed at the student receiving treatment.

"You avoided the hostages and channeled your magic to burn only the Deep Corrosion. Your skill in casting spells with millimeter-level precision is still as sharp as ever. And so is your willingness to risk your life for others."

"....."

"As expected of the 'Savior of the Holy Land.'" Yuri praised me, but I couldn't bring myself to feel happy. "As always" meant I hadn't grown at all. At the very least...

Just as I thought that... the world warped once more. A harbinger of the Anomaly. The terror of the Deep Corrosion, which had been wreaking havoc just moments ago, returned.

"Not again!" I sensed the anomaly.

In the corner of the schoolyard stood a soccer goalpost. It let out a screeching sound and disintegrated into countless pillars. Moreover, the surface of the pillars was sprouting eyeballs, entrails, cilia, claws, and fangs... the hideous parts of every living creature. They were... like spears of black flesh... The transformed posts charged straight at me. At a speed so fierce it was beyond human perception.

They flew toward me in a straight line. This wasn't Deep Erosion. It was negative energy imbued with the power of the Otherworld...

"Run, everyone! Hurry!"

"Ugajin!"

"Ugajin-kun!"

"Ryo-chan!"

I mustered every ounce of strength I had and wove my will. I visualized spheres of magic light around me. I just needed to unleash a counterattack before it hit - but my judgment was slightly delayed by fatigue. A blunder of 0.01 seconds. Was this a result of my hiatus too?

I guess I really have gotten sloppy...

The black spear was already right in front of me. Yuri and the others were still around me. I had no time to intercept it. In that case, I'll take it head-on! I'll lose an arm or a leg... But that's better than losing someone! But just as I steeled myself, I felt a gust of wind.

Something had cut in between the black spear and me... It was a human figure, and yet it moved like the wind. Just who was that!? No matter who it was, their act was heroic and selfless. Standing firm before the Anomaly without flinching, they became my shield with every ounce of their being. The uniform was that of Nishihama Gakuen High School. Flowing in the wind was long, waist-length blonde hair.

Wrapped around their limbs like a dragon were red magical lights... the color of the "Penance" domain.

Before my astonished eyes, the blonde figure spoke. "Destroy the Anomaly." As soon as the words left their lips, the red magical light extended into a Y-shape. Simultaneously, it materialized. Three beams of light transformed into long, broad blades. It became a gigantic weapon resembling a windmill, formed by three great swords joined at their pommels.

It was a figure that looked like a gust of wind, the uniform belonging to the Nishihama Gakuen High School.
Flowing in the breeze was long, waist-length blonde hair.
"Destroy the Anomaly."
As soon as the words left her mouth, a red beam of magic extended in a Y-shape — and three massive swords joined at their tips, forming a gigantic weapon resembling a windmill!!

What... is that sword...? How on earth did she...

But right before my eyes, the blonde spun it at breakneck speed. Gripping the Y-shaped hilt with both hands, she whipped it around like a whirlwind. The terrifying physical strength required to wield such a massive blade as if it were a twig, and the spinning blade sliced through the approaching black spear in a single strike. An explosion sounded, followed by a deafening roar. The Anomaly's power was into nothing. Paying no heed to the blast, the blond girl spun the three swords once more.

"I will protect you." Her sword cleaved the black spear in two once again. Another blast. Her blond hair, whipped by the gale, glistened in the sunlight. She raised her right leg even higher. "I won't let anyone lay a hand on you." She kicked the final black spear away with her own foot. The spear flew all the way to the edge of the schoolyard, where it was incinerated by a red beam of light. It was a fluid, flowing motion.

At last, I understood. What she had just performed was the Level 2 "Annihilation" Hand-to-Hand Void-Destroying Technique: "Volack's Merciless Fist." The martial art used by the young Domain Master, known as the Dragon Commander, to annihilate the Anomalous... That punch was none other than the technique a person I knew well had specialized in.

Could it be... that technique just now... I stared at that person... no, that girl, her blonde hair bathing in spring sunlight. Her long eyelashes were delicate. Her tightly pursed lips reminded me of cherry blossom petals. But the girl's gaze seemed to challenge me. "Are you unharmed, Young Master?" There was no smile on the girl's face. I felt a chill run down my spine at her intense presence. Class 1-A name tag glistened on her chest.

"You are..."

"Yes, I am a servant of the Ugajin family. My name is Koharu Matsushita..." The girl, too, fixed her gaze firmly on me. "...I am your 'attendant,' Young Master."

【Phase.2: It Wasn't Just Smiles That Were Lost】

My third day of school. Early Wednesday morning. I was walking briskly up the hill leading to school. There were no other students on their way there besides me, and on both sides of the road, cherry blossoms were in full bloom, covering the blue sky. It felt like I had the sight of the full bloom all to myself,

and I should have felt good...

But I finally let my frustration from the past three days show. "I'm not a kid. Stop tagging along with me to and from school every day."

Silence fell for a moment. Eventually, a girl emerged from behind the row of cherry trees. Blonde hair. Her posture was flawless and dignified, and her eyes were fixed straight on me. With a flurry of cherry blossoms behind her, Matsushita Koharu spoke in a clear voice.

"Is that your first command?" Indeed, this was our first conversation. I hadn't spoken a single word to Koharu since she had saved me. I think it's terrible of me not to

have even thanked her. But I can't help it. Especially that direct gaze. I hate it. But I can't help but remember...

I maintained a calm facade. "It's not an order. After all, we're classmates, aren't we?"

"But that is your position relative to me, Young Master."

"I don't like that 'position' either." As the conversation continued, a dull ache gnawed at my chest.

I used to have conversations like this. He used to advise me like this, too. But he...

I forced myself to push the memories aside. "I don't need anyone to look after me. I can take care of myself."

"I came to be by your side, Young Master, on the orders of the Commander of the Ugajin Clan. Until the Commander issues an order for my return, I must protect you." Koharu showed no sign of being shaken. She's a tough one...

"True, you shielded me on the day of the entrance ceremony. But please, stop doing things like that. If you were to die, I'd be in trouble too."

"That goes against the 'Agony of Hell.'"

"What's that?"

Koharu quietly stepped closer. "Suppose there are a large number of people inside a building. If a bomb were thrown in there, what should one do?"

"Everyone should run away."

"There's no time to run. If we leave the bomb, everyone will die. But if just one person throws themselves on top of the bomb, everyone else will be saved."

"Are you going to be that one person...?"

"If it saves Young Master's life." Without hesitation, Koharu declared. "That is Kashizuki's rational choice. I have been drilled to choose the optimal strategy for the Young Master's rule. You telling me not to shield you makes me me find myself at a loss."

Her expression as she spoke was the very picture of composure. I couldn't tell where she was at a loss at all. I looked at Koharu once more. "May I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"Would you tell me your name?" I knew it was an impertinent question. A Domain Master's name is sometimes directly linked to their magical power. Revealing it carelessly could expose one's own strength.

But Koharu nodded obediently. "I have studied counter-strategies based on game theory and criminal psychology... "Strategic Thinking"... that is my Domain Master name."

Game theory? My head was filled with question marks. Surely she didn't mean video games, did she? Or was she talking about chess or shogi? I sensed something fishy and took a step back.

"I, I don't really get it... but anyway, that 'Agony of Hell' is out of the question. Please, never sacrifice yourself for me again."

"But if I don't..."

"I'm begging you! See ya! See you in class later!" But Koharu grabbed my arm as I tried to run away and yanked me back. Whoa, no way! She's got some serious strength! It was clear Koharu had no intention of letting me go.

"Young Master! Now that I've revealed my Domain Name, I will serve by your side from now on. Naturally, that includes walking to and from school together."
"Listen. I'm the one being served here, and I think it's a hassle."
"In that case, the Commander's orders take precedence."
"Do you even know my Domain Name?"
“Yes. You are the ‘Arrogant Strategist’ and the ‘Saviors of the Holy Land’.”
“Yeah, that's why I like to act on my own. I hate orders and rules. Do you get it?”
“That is merely your convenience, Young Master. It goes against the interests of the command.”
“Servitude is an outdated custom — there’s no need for our generation to follow it, is there?”
“Even if it is old, I believe we should follow good customs... I simply wish to protect you, Young Master.” There was no hesitation in Koharu’s gaze. That single-mindedness felt strangely nostalgic.
Long ago... I sensed a similar resolve back then. That guy’s resolve still lingers in my heart. I must not forget it. But I never want to face it again. And yet…
Suddenly, Koharu turned and stood at attention as a figure approached. “Young Master, please step aside.”
“What’s with the sudden change?”
“Professor Izanagi has arrived.”
Instantly, a chill ran down my spine. That was the name of our homeroom teacher for Class 1-A. And true to Nishihama Kyuryokaku’s reputation, if the students are strange, the teachers are no less extraordinary. The woman who could be called the epitome of that walked toward us, her heels clicking on the floor. “Good morning, Uga-kami-kun, Matsushita-san. You two are here quite early, aren’t you?” Teacher Reira Izanagi. Acquired Domain: Unknown; Domain Master Name: Undisclosed. She teaches Basic Mind-Body Training. Though she wore a pair of rather unflattering black-rimmed glasses, a thick, sensual aura emanated from her entire body. After all, her full, supple chest pushed up against her white shirt, and her ample behind stretched her tight skirt to the limit. Her waistline was impeccable, too. Her hair was glossy and shoulder-length. Some students said she was a beauty without her glasses, while others insisted she was only beautiful because of them—that was the reality. But if that were all, she’d just be your average sexy teacher. The problem is that Ms. Izananagi always carries a black magic staff — that is, a magic modification aid. Moreover, the staff is shaped like countless intertwined female bodies, and its nearly two-meter-long shaft is sculpted from voluptuous breasts and buttocks.
Just yesterday, the careless Yanagishita (my classmate from Class 1-A) blurted out, “Teacher — please don’t bring such a lewd thing into the classroom! Or are you the model for those breasts on the staff?” The very next moment, she was struck hard on the head with the staff and knocked unconscious. On top of that, the teacher declared to us, who were frozen in place: “You’re a class worth tormenting.”

The teacher directed that same bewitching smile at me. “Ugajin-kun. What were you just talking about?”

“N-no, nothing in particular!”

“Is that so? I’m curious. I’d like you to tell me, too.” Ms. Izanagi approached, the scent of her perfume wafting toward me. Seeing her up close, I froze. To my shock, her shirt was unbuttoned all the way down to the second button, clearly revealing the cleavage of her soft-looking breasts! And what was showing through the fabric was a pink...

“N-nothing at all, Teacher!”

“What’s the matter? You’re blushing.”

“It’s just an optical illusion, Teacher!”

“Are you perhaps flirting with Matsushita-san? If so, I’d like to hear about it even more.” Looking closer, I saw that along with her wand, she was clutching a strange magazine. The headlines read, “Seven-Day Lesson to Train Him” and “Sadistic Techniques for Dominatrixes.” Teacher, what kind of nights are you spending, exactly...

But paying no heed to my confusion, she leaned even closer. “Ugajin-kun, you have such a cute face. Has anyone confessed their feelings to you yet?”

“That’s not true, not at all!”

“You don’t have to hide it. You’re tall, too... Hey, how tall are you?”

“Probably 174.”

“I’m sure you’ll still grow. Look, you’re this much taller than me...” The teacher reached her hand above my head. At that moment, something brushed against my arm. Looking down, I saw the teacher’s large, prominent chest! Then she whispered sweetly into my ear. “...You really are big, Uga-kami-kun.”

Teacher! That line is inappropriate! Plus, every time she moved, her chest jiggled up and down, rubbing against me. Ah, I’m going to faint...

“Ugh... Um... Teacher!”

But just then, Koharu grabbed me by the collar and, with brute force, yanked me away from the teacher. “Teacher Izanagi, there is no need for concern!”

“Oh? What do you mean by that?”

“Young Master is currently training to succeed the Ugajin family... During that time, not only is romance forbidden, but even touching a woman is prohibited. I ask that you, Ms. Izanagi, also refrain from any excessive physical contact.” I’ve never heard of such training, nor do I know anyone who’s actually done it! But Koharu silenced me with a sharp glare. Her expression was 100% serious. She really was dead serious about keeping women away from me. All the "training" stuff was probably just an excuse!

Ms. Izanagi smiled faintly. “As expected of you, Uga-kun. At your age, you should be brimming with curiosity about girls, yet you’re prepared not even to speak to them... How stoic and wonderful.”

“No, Ms. Izanagi, I’m not going that far...”

“Well, you should exercise some restraint. It’s important to enjoy romance as a high school student. After all... You have three whole years ahead of you.”

The teacher gave another enigmatic smile and started walking. Then, without a sound, Koharu slipped in between me and the teacher. “I shall accompany you, Young Master.”

Honestly, I felt completely drained. But this was the role of a 'Kashizuki' - a servant. Standing before the one they must protect, fending off intruders, and being ready to shield them with their own body. Yet I no longer wanted anyone standing in front of me.

I’m sick of it. Of watching someone’s back.

Unaware of my struggles, Koharu stepped ahead and began walking.

A “Ryouha” is a group formed when a high-ranking Domain Master claims command and gathers disciples to establish a school. Countless Ryouha exist throughout the world; I’ve heard there are a thousand in Japan alone. A Ryouha protects its jurisdiction from Anomalies... In other words, they are the living guardian deities of that land.

I was born into the Uga family, a Domain Clan that has continued since the Edo period. By some twist of fate, I am the only son and heir apparent. No, that doesn’t mean I’m guaranteed to become the successor. There are cases where a skilled disciple becomes the leader, or where a Domain Master from another family is brought in as a son-in-law. That said, the eldest son of a Domain Clan is generally raised as the top candidate for succession. That is why a “Kashizuki” is assigned to serve as the eldest son’s guardian and caretaker. They oversee not only his training in the arts but also keep a watchful eye on his conduct… they are almost like a bodyguard.

But usually, they are assigned from childhood. I’ve never heard of a Kashizuki being assigned to someone at the age of fifteen, especially one who is the same age. Yet this fact had already spread far and wide throughout Nishihama Kyuryokaku……

As we approached the school, Koharu whispered. “Young Master, please be careful. I sense countless evil intentions.”

“Ah, I can tell just by looking...” I, too, felt dizzy at the sight.

To my surprise, hundreds of students had gathered at the school gates, engaged in a fierce — and utterly ridiculous — battle of magic.

"Ugajin's here! Use the "Spirit Command' Body Hardening spell to subdue him!"

"I won't let you! Use the "Guardian' Defense spell to protect Ugajin!"

"It's useless! Break through with the "Star Training' Fire Technique!"

Countless spells flew around me, colliding and exploding. It was just like a real battlefield. But what a waste of Domain Factors. And Japan is supposed to be in a state of crisis? But after breaking through the spell battle, my seniors — battered and bruised — ran over to me.

"Guh, guh... Good morning, Uga-kun. I'm Haru from the 9th Information Combat Squad. Do you have any free periods today?"

"If you do, come join us for a trial enlistment! I'm Yamamoto 88 from the 18th Maritime Combat Squad!"

"Don't interrupt! Hey, Ugajin, come join my 82nd Propaganda Combat Squad~. Our squad is full of super cute girls~"

Another dizzy spell. It seems my stock has risen even further since the battle on enrollment day. Yesterday, I ended up being chased around all day long. And those clutches were reaching out for Koharu, who was walking ahead of me, too.

"Of course, Matsushita-san, you're coming with us too! If you two join, our squad will be the strongest in the school!"

"There's no way your squad could be the strongest in the school, 92nd Catering Squad! Matsushita-san, if you're joining, it's gotta be my squad! I'm in the 44th Cleaning Squad..."

"We can't make a beauty like Matsushita-san do cleanup after a battle! Hey, Matsushita-san, why don't you join my 23rd Public Relations Gakuto Squad and get promoted as an Idol Domain Master? Or are swimsuits a no-go?"

I'd gone beyond exasperation and had entered the realm of admiration. I see — even though they're all called Gakuto Squads, there really are all kinds.

Just then, Class 1-A rushed over as well.

"There they are, Ugajin and Matsushita!"

"This is bad — we're already surrounded by the upperclassmen!"

"You bastards! I won't hand over the treasure of our class! First-Year Class A, everyone, charge!"

Ah, Yokota, Shiraishi-san, and Tsujitani-kun. My classmates also plunged into the battle of spells and were running toward us... but it doesn't look good. After all, they can't beat the upperclassmen's techniques, and one by one, they fall.

"Ugh, I'm done for!"

"Get up, Komatsu! We're almost at Ugajin!"

"D-don't worry about me, just go on!"

"Medical Trainee! Take care of Komatsu!!"

...What on earth is this?

But amidst the commotion, Koharu spoke quietly. "Everyone, please calm down. I have no intention of joining any of the Gakuto squads. I have my own duties to fulfill as Kazuki."

Suddenly, the scene fell silent. Hundreds of people stopped in unison, and the battle of techniques ceased. But paying no heed to the palpable awkwardness around her, Koharu continued. "Furthermore, it is best for the Young Master to devote himself entirely to the rigorous training of the Uga-shin-ryu. It is more effective to hone his current magical abilities than to learn secondary skills. Please, withdraw."

Koharu's words were polite, yet they carried an unyielding killing intent. It even seemed that if anyone so much as laid a finger on me, she would cut them down...

Having intimidated everyone around her, Koharu turned to face me. "Now, let's go, Young Master."

I see. As long as Koharu is here, I won't have to deal with any more of those annoying solicitations. There's no one who can match Koharu's intensity. Wonderful. What a splendid display of loyalty.

...But I...

"Ugajin-kun?"
"Young Master?"
Professor Izanagi, everyone around us, and Koharu all let out puzzled exclamations. But I paid no mind; I knelt on the asphalt and bowed my head.
"I'm sorry. It's just as you see."
"What are you doing, Ugajin-kun?"
"I'm apologizing, Professor — to everyone here."
When I said that, Professor Izanagi smiled again. "I'd like to hear the reason."
"A Domain Master from the Ugajin family threatened everyone. The Ugajin family's misconduct is my misconduct."
Koharu's body tensed. But I glared at her stubborn expression.
"True, I thought it was a bit of a hassle too. But they weren't recruiting you out of malice... Besides, they've been waiting for you and me since early this morning."
"I... I was thinking of you, Young Master..." Koharu's voice trembled slightly. It was the first time I'd seen her so shaken. Yet she still wouldn't admit she was in the wrong. That's what really set my frustration ablaze!
"Anyway, the training classes are useless to you."
"Alright, everyone! Decide the order of observation by rock-paper-scissors!"
"You mustn't, Teacher! You can't do such a thing..."
"Everyone in Class 1-A except Ugajin, back to the classroom! What pathetic children, collapsing over something like this. I'll give you a proper punishment during today's physical and mental training class... heh heh heh heh heh." The teacher's sly chuckle and the grand rock-paper-scissors tournament drowned out our protests. And so, our trial enlistment began...

"I'm... dead..." After school. I slumped face-down on my desk.
I took a sip of the canned coffee I knew was bad for me, and Yuri, unable to bear seeing me like this, came over. "Ryo-chan, you look pretty worn out, don't you?"
"It's way worse than that... Just today, I joined 15 different Gakuto Corps for trial enrollment. In the Engineer Corps, we repaired a town destroyed by Deep Corrosion; in the Airborne Corps, we did parachute training; and in the Medical Corps, we learned how to wrap bandages..."
"Oh, so you joined some pretty normal units, then?"
"Those were actually the better ones! In the Public Relations Gakuto Corps, I was a manager for idol Domainers; in the Culinary Gakuto Corps, I made meals for a daycare center; and in the Public Relations Gakuto Corps, I visited a nursing home and sang karaoke with the elderly! The range of work is way too broad — I have no idea what's going on." But thanks to that, I realized something. The Gakuto Corps isn't just about combat; they also have many missions to contribute to the local community. With human resources running low these days, it's actually not a bad system.
But Yuri was surprised by a fact from a completely different angle. "You singing karaoke with the elderly! You, who hates group activities so much? You, who used to live

such a self-centered life? I can't believe it! Five years ago, you would've just ran away."

"Forget deserting — but I'm definitely skipping school."

"You've really grown up, Ryo-chan. Maybe it was actually fun?"

"Nah... I just feel like I've gone to the dogs." Maybe because I was drilled from childhood to fight alone, I'm still terrible at keeping in step with others. And to think I was doing an enka duet with an old lady... My title of "Lone Wolf" would be in shame... And there's more sad news. My schedule for trial enlistments is packed for tomorrow and the day after... The thought of this going on every day makes me sick. Well, I shouldn't complain. Actually, the rest of Class 1-A is in even worse shape than I am. Everyone's sprawled on the floor, twitching uncontrollably. Just what kind of physical and mental training did Ms. Izanagi put us through?!

A timid voice drifted over from among the pile of classmates lying there. "U-Ugajin-kun. There's no way we can try out for every single Gakuto Squad~"

"Oh, Mii-san." It was a slender classmate who had appeared. Her face and demeanor were gentle, but this was none other than our Class 1-A class representative, Mitsuya Kataoka — commonly known as Mii-san.

Incidentally, the reason she became class representative was because Ms. Izanagi declared, "You seem the most obedient." My condolences...

Even so, Mii-san offered some advice befitting a class representative. "There are about 700 students at Nishihama Academy, and over 100 Gakuto Teams. It'd be wise to narrow it down to a team that suits your aptitude."

"Thanks for the advice — too little, too late... So, have you decided which one you're joining, Mii-san?"

"Hmm... Well, I'm hoping for the First Jurisdiction Gakuto Squad."

"First Jurisdiction? Is there even a squad like that? I haven't been recruited by them." I took out my brand-new cell phone and opened the calendar screen. Mii shook her head.

"That's to be expected. The First Jurisdiction Gakuto Squad is, so to speak, this school's student council. It's an honorable squad that manages requests brought in from outside the school and commands the other squads... Naturally, the entrance requirements are strict — only students with excellent academic records can join."

"That squad sounds kind of intimidating."

Then Yuri (she's really full of energy, as expected) gave a mischievous laugh. "Don't worry. Ryo-chan will definitely never get recruited by the First Jurisdiction."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the captain of the First Jurisdiction is Shogoin-kun, after all."

"Ugh... Yeah, I'd definitely want to avoid that one."

But Mii-san smiled with a friendly expression. "No, Uga-kun is the one who should join the First Jurisdiction. You're the student with the highest expectations among the new first-years, after all."

"Even so, the captain is Shogoin."

"Huh... Is there a problem with that?"

"Well, various things."

"So, which squad do you plan to join?"
"That's what I'm thinking about." Even though I said that, I still couldn't bring myself to join any Gakuto Squad. I'm not really sure how to explain it, though.
Then, a strangely listless voice came from another table. "It's a waste of time to ask, Mii-san. The Ugajin heir probably doesn't want to team up with mere trainees like us, right?"
I turned my gaze toward that seat. Short, dyed-red hair. Earrings in his ears. Even at Nishihama Academy, where the dress code is casual, this appearance stands out. His posture was arrogant and defiant. Even the way he leaned against the wall was arrogant and insolent. And for some reason, he was trimming his beard with a razor. That razor was bizarre, too. It was a so-called combat razor with a blade spanning sixty centimeters. Whether someone brings in a weapon like that or a teacher beats a student to the ground, it's hardly a big deal here at Nishihama Kyuryokaku.
My classmate, Yano Elhiko, who skillfully wielded this weapon, stretched his legs out with an air of annoyance. "Hey, Ugajin? You're actually looking down on the whole Gakuto Squad system, aren't you? You think it's pointless to gather a bunch of half-baked, unreliable kids."
"Stop it, Elhiko-kun." Yuri scolded him, but I didn't argue. As I remained silent, Elhiko sighed.
"I guess I hit the nail on the head. But looking down on us isn't cool. We don't feel good when people look at us like that." Elhiko stood up and twirled his combat razor. He was tall. Well-built. A defiant smile played on his face — the kind of bold expression only those who love a fight can pull off. Even though Yano wasn't fazed by Ms. Izanagi's punishment, strange screams filled the classroom.
"What a weirdo..."
"Don't do it, Elhiko."
"Are you out of your mind, picking a fight with Ugajin?"
"Don't go looking for death! Life is fun!"
...Why is everyone worried about Elhiko?
Even so, the guy with the razor closed in on me. "So then, Ugajin..."
"...Ah, uh..."
"You — join my Gakuto Squad."
"Huh?"
As I stood there dumbfounded, Elhiko smiled. "I'll fix your superior attitude. So lend your strength to the new Gakuto Squad I'm starting. How about it? Is this a fair 50-50 deal?" He was brimming with confidence. But Yuri and the entire class were deflated.
"What's so fair about that, seriously!"
"There's no way a Domain Master like Uga-kun would become a subordinate to a Trainee like Elhiko-kun. Even as a joke, that's just lame."
Even Mii-san was exasperated, and Elhiko's expression turned grim. "Don't call it lame, you masochistic class representative! You were the one writhing in agony during class while Ms. Izanagi tormented you with her heels!"

"N-no, that's not it... That was just a coincidence — she just happened to step on my foot. Besides, the teacher was careful to vary the pressure, making it softer and harder..."
"That wasn't an accident! You're not actually calling the teacher "Queen,' are you?"
"I-I-I wouldn't be so rude to Lady Leila!"
"Already trained?"
Everyone burst out laughing at the conversation between Mii and Elhiko. It was a fun time for me too, for the first time in a while...
"Come on, Ryo-chan, you should at least laugh at a time like this!"
Yuri, who was laughing hysterically, nudged me, leaving me confused. "I've been laughing this whole time, haven't I? Oh, come on. I'm telling you, you don't have to keep that tense look on your face and be on guard against the Deep Corrosion right now!"
Huh... After she said that, I touched my face. Just as I thought. Even though I should be having fun, my face wasn't smiling. I tugged at my stiffened cheeks and sighed. It seems I really am...

The setting sun was streaming into the school building. I stood in the schoolyard, gazing at the empty evening glow.
Barricade tape had been strung up around the spot where we fought three days ago. It must have been put up by the Shogoin family, the faction that governs this area.
Just then, a faint presence approached from behind me.
"Koharu?"
"Yes, Young Master." The girl stood a short distance away. Her blonde hair, bathed in the setting sun, sparkled like delicate jewelry. But Koharu was biting her lip, looking awkward.
"...I'm sorry about this morning."
"It's fine, don't worry about it."
I squinted into the setting sun. "It's just that I don't want to be a burden to others. I don't want to put up walls between myself and others either... but you were watching over my trial enlistment, weren't you?"
"Yes... from the sidelines."
"..."
"Eh..."
"Do you really think I should focus so much on my training?"
"Training is important, sure. But everyone here at this school is a Domain Master or a Trainee. If I interact with them, there are things I can learn. Besides, I need time for a lot of things. Isn't that why I'm here at school?" I used to think high school was a hassle. But after coming here for three days, I realized that wasn't the case. When I'm here, talking with teachers and friends, I can forget my serious worries. I can't forget what happened three years ago, but if I keep dwelling on it, I'll end up breaking down.
As I spoke, Koharu's eyelashes fluttered in the breeze. Her usual killing intent vanished, and a look of sorrow crossed her face. "There is a reason I must protect you. You must have realized that, Young Master. Isn't that precisely why you're here?"

I was taken aback by her unexpected insight. "Did you... realize it?"
"Yes... Young Master, someone is trying to take your life."
A spring breeze blew across the schoolyard. I had no choice but to acknowledge Koharu, her blonde hair blowing in the wind.
"I know. That blow you shielded me from... that was Void Power, wasn't it?" It was an Anomalous Magic. Just as there are nine realms for humanity, there are magical systems within the Anomalous Dimensions. To humanity, it is a power that could be called evil black magic.

Koharu nodded slightly. "Void Power cannot act autonomously. It always requires someone to wield it. In other words, there's a Sin-Bearer."

Sin-Bearers... humans who, despite being human, have been captivated by Void Power and fallen as pawns of the Otherworld. Through rituals, they sacrifice all the domain factors within their bodies and gain power in exchange. Void Power cannot exist without a Sin-Bearer. The Sin-Bearers' motives vary widely. Some want money, others harbor hatred toward someone... Such people turn to Void Power to achieve their own ends. I've been fighting Sin-Bearers since I was a child. My confirmed kill count so far is over a hundred. Naturally, it wouldn't be surprising if I've made some enemies.

Then Koharu took a step closer to me. "The psychology of a Sin-Bearer is chaotic and evil. However, for the sake of their goals — and to ensure their own victory — they will act rationally and logically."

"Is that the Sin-Bearer psychology and game theory you've studied? Then, I'll ask you a few more questions." When I urged her, Koharu lowered her eyes.

"Game theory isn't merely the analysis of games. It's decision-making analysis involving multiple actors... In other words, it's a field of study that treats human competition — be it shogi, chess, sports, corporate management, or politics — as a game."

"What about war?"

"Of course, that's included. We Domain Masters and our enemies, the Sin-Bearers... we are the game players participating in this asymmetric war. To ensure our survival, we fight using every means at our disposal. We call those actions "strategies.'"

"Is that what you're studying?"

"Yes. Reading the psychology of the Sin-Bearers, predicting what strategies they will employ, and devising the optimal counter-strategy to oppose them... that is what we call "anti-phase strategy.'"

"So, you're basically a strategist. But even I think things through when I'm fighting a Sin-Bearer. Like, if I get hit with a Void Attack, what technique should I use to counter it?"

At that, Koharu looked slightly troubled. "That's actually one of the strategies known as the "optimal response.' You see your opponent's move, then play the best counter... It's like rock-paper-scissors where you go second."

"Is that different from how you think?"

"I predict which rock-paper-scissors move my opponent will make."

"How?"

When asked, Koharu paused for a moment. "Then, Young Master, let's play a game."

"What kind of game?"

"We'll take turns saying numbers from one to twenty in order. We can say one or two numbers at a time. The one who says twenty last wins."

"Alright, I'll take you on!"

"Then, you go first."

.....I have a bad feeling about this. Koharu's expression is completely impassive. But precisely because she's keeping a poker face, I see this as a trap. She's deliberately letting me go first so she can win. Am I going to fall for that?

"...No, you go first, Koharu."
"Very well, I'll start. One, two."
"Hmm..... three."
"Four, five"
.....She took two and five. So, is it even-odd?
"Then, six."
"Seven, eight."
"Nine... (Is it even-odd after all?)"
"Ten, eleven."
"Twelve?"
"Thirteen, fourteen."
"Fifteen... (We're alnost there, focus.)"
"Sixteen, seventeen."
"Eighteen... Ah, wrong...!"
"Nineteen, twenty. I win." Koharu didn't seem particularly pleased with her victory. Her expression made it seem as though she expected to win... and that put me in a bad mood.
"So what? What's the point of this game?"
"The surefire way to win this game is to take 17 first. If I take 17, Young Master can only say 18 or 19. Therefore, 20 is mine. Similarly, 14, 11, 8, 5, and 2 are also key numbers."
"So what?"
"This strategy is worked out from the end." She said that, and I thought about it. It took me five seconds to understand it in my own way.
"So, you decide on the final strategy first, then work backward through the process?"
"Yes. As long as you know the opponent's ultimate goal, you can predict the moves they'll make along the way. This is a way of thinking frequently used in game theory."
But to me, it still seems a bit fishy. "But the opponent is human. Variations based on personality can't be fully captured by theory alone."
"Quite so. That is why criminal psychology is also necessary. You cannot win unless you see through your opponent's mind."
"I see... Ah, could it be that when I said, "After you'..."
"Yes. As I mentioned earlier, "two' is a key number. The player who takes it first has the advantage. So I said, "After you,' to provoke your suspicion, Young Master."
"...You think I'm a suspicious person, don't you?"
"I apologize. However, just as I predicted, Young Master suspected me and ceded the first move. This is my "strategic thinking.'"
...I scratched my forehead vigorously. I could never think like that. I don't even know if this would let me predict the enemy's strategy. But Koharu's words were convincing. It's a cold, analytical approach, but perhaps that's precisely why she's capable of putting herself on the line — of enduring that "agonizing internal conflict.'
"So? What's your take on the first attack?"

"A surprise attack. And it was carried out at the moment when you, Young Master, was most off guard."

"You're right. I'd just returned home and felt at ease, and I was just so sleepy. Reuniting with Yuri had also made me let my guard down."

"The problem is the fact that the perpetrator had a firm grasp on your situation."

"Ah... I see."

"Furthermore, they had already pinpointed the Young Master's return date and even the high school he would be attending. The enemy possesses meticulous intelligence-gathering capabilities and a well-thought-out plan. And most likely, they are still monitoring the Young Master right now."

Indeed, if I rewind the events and think about it, it makes sense. Koharu's analysis is so logical that there's no room for argument. "In that case, what will the enemy do next?"

"I'm still pondering that. After all, we have very little information... However, given that they pulled off such a daring feat, I don't think they'd give up after just one failure."

"So that's why you're sticking close to me?"

"Are you satisfied with that explanation?"

Even when asked, I couldn't answer right away. True, the enemy had made thorough preparations, but that didn't mean they'd definitely attack again. Maybe they were intimidated by Koharu and my magical power and called off the plan... No, that's not it. The enemy probably anticipated that I'd have a bodyguard like Koharu. If that's the case, the attack the other day was just a test run, and the real assault is yet to come...

.....I found myself convinced. Perhaps sensing my expression, Koharu nodded in agreement. Still, the questions kept popping out in my head. Who on earth was after my life, and for what reason? Of course, many people hold a grudge against me, and countless others harbor hostility toward the Uga family. And to launch a surprise attack right after my return...

Just then, Yuri's voice rang out. "Ah, there you are, Ryo-chan!"

Cold sweat trickled down my back, and my throat went dry. As Yuri ran toward me from the school building, I put on a brave face. "What's with you, already! I'm going home first, so just be quiet!"

"...Ah, yeah, sorry."

"Who's sorry?"

"I said we'd go home together today."

"Yeah. And besides..."

Before Yuri could explain, Mii-san and Elhiko rushed over. "Ugajin-kun, come take the First Jurisdiction interview with me. With your skills, you're guaranteed to get in."

"You bitch, are you planning to use Ugajin as a ticket to get into the First Jurisdiction yourself?! Come to think of it, I thought you were just giving him friendly advice earlier!"

"N-no, that's not what I meant... I just want to be friends with Uga-kun. I mean, Uga-kun seems like someone you can rely on..."

"A masochist and into that sort of thing too!? Don't tell me you two are already in a relationship where you take, give, and get?"
Facing Elhiko's suspicious gaze, I vehemently denied it. "Don't be ridiculous! Just so you know, I'm not into that stuff! I'm not the bottom, and I'm not the top either."
"We'll see about that! You see it all the time in manga, right? A young lord domain warrior and a beautiful young domain warrior who've nurtured their love on the battlefield, and right before the final battle, "I've always felt this way about you...' "And I've always felt the same way about you, Young Master..." — that kind of comrade-in-arms "scenario."
"What kind of manga is that?! And don't call me "Young Master' in that creepy voice! Stop staring at me like you're some pretty boy!"
"But seriously... don't you think it could happen in real life, Ugajin? I've got memories of seeing a male Domain Master training with me and my heart skipping a beat at the sight of his glistening sweat! That summer when we stood side by side in the shower after training, and I blushed at the sight of his bare skin!"
"No way. Neither the memory nor the summer ever happened. And seriously, why do you know so much about this? Don't tell me, Elhiko, you're the one who...!"
"Nah, I just thought it'd be funny to leak this online. The heir to the Ugajin family is actually ××! And he's ×××× with a classmate! The rumours will be all over the place in less than three days, right?"
Fighting off the dizziness, I groaned to Yuri. "A-anyway, I'm exhausted today... I'm going straight home."
"Eh... Are you really leaving?"
"See you at school tomorrow."
"Wait, just have a cup of coffee with me, okay?"
"Nah, I'm picky about coffee. If it's just some random place, I'd rather not go."
"Ryo-chan turning down coffee?! Are you running a fever or something?"
I hurriedly moved away from Yuri. If she used her "Soul" technique, she'd know I was flustered. Trying to cover it up, I reluctantly nodded. "A-alright, just a little bit then..."
But just as Yuri let out a cheer, Koharu hurriedly whispered in my ear. "Young Master, please refrain from unnecessary outings. It is far too reckless and high-risk."
"Is that a strategic decision too? But I don't want to worry Yuri."
"Understood... Then I will stay by your side to protect you."
"Hold on a sec, you're not coming. They'll figure out we're on guard."
"If we're obviously on guard, the enemy won't approach so easily. That's what a deterrence strategy is all about. Besides, I am your loyal attendant, Young Master."
"I haven't exactly acknowledged that yet..."
As we argued, Yuri turned around. "What are you two talking about? Let's hurry up and go."
"...Hmm, hmm." While I gave an ambiguous reply, Koharu stepped forward and started walking. Right in front of me, of course.
I still couldn't accept that. It's precisely because I'm being targeted that I don't want to be protected.

The area in front of Nishihama Station was bustling with the energy of the evening. The massive shopping mall in front of the station was packed with shoppers, and the main street was overflowing with young families. "Lapis Lazuli" is a small open-air café located right there in front of Nishihama Station. It has a wooden terrace, and the bright interior features chic wooden tables... If that were all, it would be just an ordinary café, but I was a little surprised by the female staff member who greeted us.

"Welcome. A party of five... eh, Uga-kun?"

"Huh... um, I'm pretty sure..." The one who appeared was a petite, delicate girl. She had unusually fair skin, and her chestnut-brown hair swayed softly. Her startled expression reminded me of a frightened little animal. I'm pretty sure she's in my class...

"Hello, Morikita-san. I heard you were running a shop near the station, so I decided to stop by." Hearing Yuri say that, I finally remembered.

"Ah, right, Morikita-san. Um, Morikita..."

"M-Morikita Misora." A soft voice. She certainly doesn't stand out in class. She's quiet and reserved; I don't recall ever seeing her make a fuss.

With a nervous look on her face, Morikita-san led us to a table by the window. At the back of the shop was a glass-enclosed roasting room, where a fair-skinned woman who looked a lot like Morikita-san was busy at work. She looked to be about twenty-three or twenty-four. She was a sophisticated woman with flaxen hair tied back. Elhiko suddenly piped up.

"Ugajin... Is that her older sister?"

"Apparently so."

"What a beautiful pair of sisters!"

"W-well, I guess so..."

"This is a nice place."

"Yeah, I think so too. So please don't bring your combat razor in here! It ruins the atmosphere!"

"Even a man like Ugajin is being soft. We wielders never know when we might get attacked by enemies. How can we let go of our weapons?"

"I get that, but at least hide it in your bag. It'll scare the other customers."

"It's the opposite. It actually puts them at ease. If you're wearing a Nishihama Academy uniform, everyone knows you're a User, and the people of Nishihama are used to it by now."

"Whoa, is that how it is?"

"What a brutal world we've come to..." I thought, dumbfounded, as I opened the menu. At that moment, I was stunned. This shop's black coffee clearly listed the producers: Blackburn Farm in Tanzania, and the Oswald Farm in Colombia. And even beans from the village of Yirgacheffe in Ethiopia — even though that area is occupied by the Deep Erosion and beans are in short supply! Of course, the beans are hand-picked. They've even been hand-sorted to remove any defective beans.

I was a little surprised by the female staff member I met at the small open-air café.
"Welcome! ...Wait, Uga-kun?" "Huh... um, I think..."
The girl who appeared was petite and delicate. I'm pretty sure she's in my class...
"I-I'm Morikita Misora."

What on earth is this place?! It's so meticulous, you'd never guess it's just a neighborhood coffee shop!
Just as my expectations were skyrocketing, Morikita-san approached us, looking a bit hesitant.
"...Mirokuji-san, have you decided?"
"Yes. I'll have a hot Lady Grey tea. Hey, what cake do you recommend?"
"Hmm... Maybe the maple chiffon cake?"
"Oh, that sounds like it'd go well with tea. I'll have that, then."
Elhiko ordered a Coke, Mii-san ordered orange juice, and Koharu ordered a matcha latte. I said, trying to hide my excitement, "I'll have the Golden Mandheling."
"Understood. And... about the other day, when you helped me... uh, thank you..."
"The other day... oh, you mean the Deep Corrosion incident?"
"...Yeah. You helped me, too."
"Oh, right... Do you help out at the shop often?"
"Yeah. It's just me and my older sister... our parents are divorced."
"I see... Sorry, that was a weird question."
Morikita-san gave me a small smile, but the conversation felt awkward. I'm hopeless. Interpersonal relationships... I'm especially bad with girls.
Just then, an older woman came out of the roasting room. "Nice to meet you... Ryoto Ugajin and Koharu Matsushita?"
"Yes."
"I'm Saori, Misora's older sister. "I've heard all about your achievements at school from Misora." Saori's cheerful voice rang out. Even though she wasn't wearing any makeup, a sweet scent tickled my senses. She gave off the vibe of a graceful, mature woman. "And I hear you're Ryoto-kun, the young master of the Ugajin family. It's such an honor to have someone like you visit us."
"Uh, yeah."
"Oh, I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't be talking about this, should I?" As Saori stepped behind the counter, Morikita-san brought over my order.
I solemnly inhaled the aroma of the Mandheling, took a sip... and in that instant... it hit me! The rich flavor and aroma rose to my head. The sharp bitterness made me sigh involuntarily. "This is amazing."
At the sound of my voice, Morikita-san turned around. And she blushed. She hurriedly hid her face behind the tray and scurried to the back of the counter. Sensing something was wrong, Koharu's expression darkened.
"Young Master, what's wrong with that coffee?!"
"No, don't worry. More importantly, Yuri, thanks for telling me about this place."
"Is the coffee here really that good?"
"Yeah. It's no exaggeration to say that any of you drinking anything other than coffee here are losers." Everyone's eyes went wide... Well, never mind. I've been starving for a taste like this. Ah, how many years has it been... since I last drank real coffee...
Then Koharu stared intently at me. "So you like coffee, Young Master?"
"Yeah, I guess."

"How would you like your milk and sugar?"
"Oh, I hardly ever put any in."
"And what about your food preferences?"
"I'm more of a Japanese cuisine guy, I guess."
"Then, is there anything you absolutely can't eat? What's your preferred bath temperature? What's your favorite music? Are you the type to exchange email addresses right away? Is there anything you couldn't live without..."
Faced with this sudden barrage of questions, Yuri stepped in.
"Hey, Koharu-chan!"
"Yes, Yuri-sama?"
"You're using honorifics with me too? Well, whatever. But what are you going to do with all this information about Ryo-chan?" Yuri's tone was a bit sharp, but Koharu calmly sipped her matcha latte.
"I am the Young Master's attendant. I must know everything about him."
"That may be true, but—"
"For example... whether he has a girlfriend or not."
Elhiko snorted.
"Is something wrong, Young Master?"
"Of course it is! Why on earth do I have to report even that to you?"
"It's necessary for my strategic thinking. I can't offer advice unless I know who you care about."
"Don't worry. There's no girlfriend I care about anywhere — ugh, ugh, ugh, ugh, ugh!" I was writhing in agony all by myself. But Yuri didn't even pretend to stab my thigh with a mechanical pencil; she just flashed a relaxed smile.
"H-hmm... But the bath temperature doesn't really matter, does it?"
"No. Young Master lives alone near Nishihama Station. I'll be coming to look after him soon."
"In that case, I should be the first to..."
But before Yuri could finish, Morikita-san asked, "Where exactly is "near the station'?"
"Ah, Sky Palace Nishihama. It's actually pretty close from here."
"Uh... yeah. Uga-kun, are you having trouble living on your own?"
"No, I'm fine for now... but why?"
"Ugh... never mind." Morikita blushed again. Just as I was wondering why she was so embarrassed...
"Yikes!" With Morikita's scream, the cup fell to the floor. A strange sound suddenly filled the air, making Morikita-san's hands tremble.
But it wasn't actually a sound. It was the sinister breath of something from the other side, connecting this world to the one beyond. Realizing this, Yuri also stood up. "Ryo-chan, this..."
It engulfed the area, growing louder and faster with a buzzing sound. I immediately stood up.
"Morikita, are you okay?"
"U... uh-huh."

"Here's the bill for the five of us. And close the shutter quickly. Don't leave the shop. Elhiko, Mii... look after Morikita."
"Eh... could that just now have been..."
"I'm going to check it out."
But before I could even stand up, Koharu was already heading for the entrance.
"I'll go, Young Master."
"Koharu..."
"Please consider your position once more. Don't forget that you're being targeted." Whispering this, Koharu dashed out of the shop.
The feeling of being protected by someone else... it's unbearable. No matter how long it's been since I've fought, I refuse to accept it. I chased after Koharu. "Wait, Koharu! It's dangerous to go alone!"
Before us lay the west side of Nishihama Station at dusk. The people passing by on the street hadn't noticed anything unusual yet. But that didn't last long. A strange humming sound reached its peak, and then — crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! — the shop windows in the shopping district shattered.
"What's going on?!" "Aaaah!"
People were showered with shards and fell to the ground. But the glass hadn't simply shattered. It had broken free from its frames of its own accord. And now, it was streaking across the sky, encircling Koharu and me. A cordon with a radius of about twenty meters. The glass panels writhed as if possessed. At the same time, the public address system issued a warning.
"An anomalous reaction has just been confirmed in Nishihama Honmachi 1-chome! To all citizens currently out and about..."
Panic. Shoppers fled in all directions, and shops began lowering their shutters one after another. The street in front of the station quickly became deserted.
"Koharu, don't let your guard down..!" The call... I was overcome by a sense of exhaustion. The strength drained from my knees, and my vision turned rainbow-colored. At the same time, I felt nauseous. A dizziness akin to anemia washed over me, and I collapsed onto the asphalt.
What the... all of a sudden... And... the spell...
▼Domain Factor, activation failure.
▼▼ "Salos's Fierce Limbs" automatic activation failed. Activation Domain Factor, lost.
▼▼ Failure to automatically activate "Vine's Wise Eyes and Ears". Domain factor required for activation: lost.
The spells I had prepared were having absolutely no effect. Then Koharu glared at the glass panel.
"That thing is absorbing our domain factors... Ugh... It's taking a lot of them!" Indeed, domain factors were leaking out of her body. Because of that, the factors necessary for automatic activation were lost, and the spells failed to activate.
▼ Remaining domain factors decreased to 30 decius.
▼▼ Remaining domain factors decreased to 25 decius.
▼▼▼ Remaining domain factors decreased to 20 decius.

The magical power continued to leak. Following its flow led her to the surrounding glass panels.

"Is this also a false power?!" Still surrounded, Koharu clenched her fist. "If this continues, my factors will be exhausted! Once I've broken through, Young Master, please flee!" With a shout, Koharu leaped. She kicked off the asphalt and leaped toward the glass panel. A red magical light flashed in her hand, and three Y-shaped swords materialized. The "Agony" domain weapon, which is normally converted into domain factors and stored within her body... Koharu roared its name. "Crimson Inferno Trident!"

Whirling with a gale, the three blades spun at high speed. But just as the strike was about to land, a new figure materialized before Koharu.

"Guh...!" Koharu's body was effortlessly knocked back.

Emerging from the dimensional rift was a colossal figure, approximately 3.5 meters tall. It resembled a medieval knight clad in gleaming black armor. Yet, in its helmet-like head, inorganic eyes flashed, and it was equipped with a 50-millimeter machine gun on its right arm and a chainsaw on its left. A half-beast, half-machine demon god...

"Void Attack Form!" A war demon of a different form, created by Void Power. A heartless, living weapon serving as the main force in the War of the Different Forms. For Domain Masters, it was a familiar enemy. Koharu, too, bravely faced it head-on.

"Please flee, Young Master!" Swinging the Crimson Inferno Trident, she closed in on the Void Attack Form. What met her was the roar of the machine gun. Boom! Boom! Boom! Heavy artillery fire rained down on Koharu. But there were no explosions; the street trees and cars hit by the shells warped black and vanished. These weren't physical projectiles, but Void Power rounds condensed from the power of the Otherworld.

Koharu leapt into the air, evading the fire. But she was surrounded by glass panels, leaving her few options for escape. Even so, as Koharu spun her trident, I mustered every ounce of my strength.

What the hell are you wavering for... Koharu is drawing the Void Form toward her. Then, what I have to do is obvious!

I stood up as if roaring, extending my arm as if to challenge it. I zeroed in on the glass panels... that is, the Void Power. If she keeps getting her Domain Factors sucked away like this, even Koharu will be in a desperate situation.

▼ Remaining Domain Factors: 12...

Come on, "Aini's Devouring Fireball"! What I unleashed was a fireball one meter in diameter. A Level 2 "Annihilation" long-range attack technique streaked straight toward the glass panel. Its ferocious momentum was befitting of an Attack Domain Master known as the "Duke of Flames."

But just as it seemed certain to hit... the glass panel glowed dimly. It was cunning, as if it had been waiting for the attack. Then, "Aini's Devouring Fireball" made a sharp turn and came hurtling right back at me. "What a cheap trick..!" I leaped to the opposite side of the street. "Aini's Devouring Fireball" struck the spot where I had

been standing just moments ago. Blasted by the scorching heat and shockwave, I was slammed into the asphalt.

"Young Master!" As I turned toward Koharu, the Void Form swung its chainsaw down at her. She dodged it at the last second. The blade, spinning at breakneck speed, sliced clean through a utility pole.

I scrambled to my feet and shouted sharply. "Don't worry about me! I'll handle the Void Form!"

"But, Young Master..."

"Don't you ever tell me to run again!" However, because I'd wasted a shot with "Aini's Devouring Fireball", my remaining Domain Factors had dropped to ten Decius... no, they'd already fallen to seven Decius. I didn't have the reserves left to cast a powerful spell. As long as that Void Power remained intact, the longer this dragged on, the more disadvantageous it would be for us.

But just then, Yuri leapt out from "Lapis Lazuli".

"I'll back you up, Ryo-chan!" Yuri had wrapped her fingertips in the white spell light of "Spirit Life". What she cast was the Level 2 long-range single-target healing spell, "Murmur's Unstinting Aid". The soaring light flew over the glass panel and struck me. In that instant, Yuri's warmth washed over me.

Thank you... Yuri! My stamina surged, and the dizziness vanished. At the same time, my Domain Factor recovered to 20 Decius. The spell of Murmur, the medical Domain Master known as the "Duke of Resurrection," had transferred Yuri's Domain Factor to me.

Now recovered, I glared at the encircling forces. This time, I'll break through their defenses! But ranged attacks will be reflected... Then I'll just smash them directly!

Focusing my consciousness, I activated the spell. A heavy, grinding sound. A black spell light snaked out from my right arm. What appeared was a chain of spell light over ten meters long... the third-level "Annihilation" Long-Range Striking Spell, "Gracia's Hated Iron Chain". But that wasn't all. I applied spell modifications to the technique used by Gracia, the Extinction Combat Domain Master known as the King of Slaughter.

▼Spell Branch!

▼Further Power Boost!

"Gracia's Hated Iron Chain" was infused with a generous amount of domain factors and trembled with power. Then, with a sharp twitch, it pulsed and instantly branched into countless strands.

"Koharu, get down!" As Koharu dropped to the ground, I swung the bundle of black chains overhead in a flash. "Gracia's Hated Iron Chains" grazed her blonde hair and slammed into the glass panel. Unable to reflect the direct impact, the illusory force shattered one after another. With just a single swing... the encirclement was broken!

"Ryo-chan... that was amazing..." Yuri marveled, but a heavy fatigue weighed down on my body. I had applied triple spell branching and power enhancement to the "Gracia's Hated Iron Chains", making it a total of seven domain factors... It was right at the limit of what I could handle.

I went a little too far. But the domain factor is stable. There's no more leakage. Now it's time to counterattack!

Taking a breath, I reached for a new spell. But just then, Koharu's cry rang out.

"Step back, Young Master!"

I looked up to see that the Void Form had closed in on me without my noticing. Roaring its chainsaw, it charged straight at me. That's when Koharu stepped in.

"Destroy the Anomaly!" Koharu slashed at it with her Crimson Inferno Trident. The strike severed the base of the chainsaw, cutting off its left arm. The chainsaw fell

to the ground, exploded, and vanished without a trace. But the Void Form slammed its right-arm machine gun into Koharu. It was a counterattack surprisingly agile for such a massive form. Koharu couldn't dodge it.

"Gah...!" A brief moment of agony. Koharu vanished from right before my eyes. Or so I thought — the very next instant, the convenience store sign was completely destroyed. Koharu, who had been blown away, had crashed into it head-on. The sign was completely destroyed.

"Koharu!"

Her blonde hair was flung onto the pavement, bouncing around. The splatter was fresh blood. Covered in blood, the girl lay face-down on the ground. Far from screaming, she didn't move a muscle. In that split second, hundreds of scenes flashed through my mind.

...Nice to meet you, Young Master. I am your...
...Do you intend to call yourself a Domain Master with skills like that?
...I'm glad you're safe, Young Master.

In my mind, twelve years had passed. Voices I would never hear again. People I would never see again. I regretted and raged that those years had ended after just twelve.

And then the same scene repeated itself. Moreover, I found myself screaming as if in prayer, just like the person in the same position.

"I told you to stop!" Aiming at the Void Form before me, I gathered what little Domain Factor I had left. But just as I was about to unleash the spell, the Void Form was enveloped in blue light.

"...!"

The glow solidified into a cube, encircling the Void Form. The blue light was "Chinju". The Level 3 Individual Capture Technique, "Marbas's Prison of Condemnation", unleashed writhing bolts of lightning. The trapped Void Form couldn't even resist and was blown to smithereens. But even the blast was contained within the cube. Having fulfilled its purpose, "Malbus's Condemned Prison" vanished, and silence returned to the street in front of the station. Only her scream reached my ears.

"Koharu-chan!" I tried to rush over to the fallen blonde girl. But someone's hand was resting on my shoulder.

"It's been a while, Ryoto. But this is my town. I fight, and I protect it."

"You are..."

When I turned around, the owner of the voice hurled a dry sneer at me. "More importantly... another one of your servants has died. Reflect on that... on your own unforgivable immaturity."

【Phase.3: The Servant, The Served】

Sky Palace, Room 277, Nishihama.

That's the apartment I'm renting. In the living room of this four-bedroom, two-bathroom unit, personal belongings shipped from my parents' house and newly purchased household items are piled up, still in their boxes. Outside the window lies the night view of Nishihama... but down below, in front of the station, ambulances and police cars are crisscrossing the area, handling the aftermath of the Void Entity's attack. Even at 9 p.m., the commotion hadn't subsided.

Listening to the sound of the sirens, I kept staring at Koharu's sleeping face. Wake up, Koharu. Otherwise, I won't even be able to thank you.

Koharu remained unconscious. Her expression as she slept on my double bed was peaceful, but honestly, I was on pins and needles. After all, she'd collapsed while protecting me. My own inadequacy...

But as if sensing my anxiety, Yuri whispered. "Ryo-chan, don't worry so much... I've done everything I could with my healing magic."

"...Ah, yeah."

"The rest depends on Koharu's ability to recover. If the healing magic works, she should regain consciousness."

I chose to believe those words. My anxiety hasn't gone away, but all I can do now is pray. "Sorry, Yuri... keeping you up this late."

"It's fine. It's for Koharu's sake."

"Did you call home?"

"Yeah, I just texted them... They told me to take a taxi if I'm going to be late."

"I see... But since I'm already asking for favors, could you stay with Koharu a little longer?"

"Sure... but what about you, Ryo?"

"I have somewhere I need to go."

"How am I supposed to explain this to Koharu when she wakes up?"

"Just tell her I'll be back in about an hour." I slipped my arms into my school uniform jacket. "I can't use healing magic like you can. Even if I stay by Koharu's side, there's nothing I can do for her. But... I have to fulfill my duty as the heir of the Uga family."

"Ryo-chan..."

I left my room and stepped out into the street, heading toward the sea breeze blowing in from the east.

Nishihama Seaside Park is a sandy beach stretching three kilometers from north to south. It's a five-minute walk from Nishihama Station. I've heard it gets crowded with families on weekends. But as soon as I entered the park, I sensed countless presences around me. Glares clearly watching me. Ignoring them, I headed toward the beach, where that man was already standing.

He was wearing the Nishihama Academy uniform too. He was taller than me and muscular. Much more robust than he used to be. But his cold profile hadn't changed since we were kids.

"Sorry I'm late."

When I spoke, his face — which looked like a Greek statue — turned toward me. His gray hair fluttered in the sea breeze as his mature voice echoed. "It's fine. You were accompanying that Kashizuki, weren't you?"

"Yeah... well... technically, it wasn't a Kashizuki."

"That's surprising. For someone called the "The Prideful Strategist' to employ a Kashizuki again... So, did you make it out okay?"

"Thanks to Yuri, I managed."

Once again, I gazed at the familiar face I hadn't seen in so long. Ash Shogoin. His Domain Name, derived from his hair, is "Guardian of Ashes." Captain of the First Jurisdictional Combat Squad. He is the heir apparent of the Shogoin family, the faction that governs Nishihama City and the surrounding towns and villages. Since the territories of the Ugajin family and the Shogoin family are adjacent, we've known each other since childhood. But without any sense of nostalgia, Ash let out a short sigh. "Still, that was a real struggle. Ryoto, what's your tolerance level now?"

"Seven. Domain Factor Capacity is 32."

"Mine is 12. Domain Factor Capacity is 58. To add to that, I've acquired both "Guardian' and "Divine Wisdom' up to the basic sixth difficulty level."

"...Tolerance level 12, huh?" I looked at Ash with admiration. Even among Domain Masters, it's customary not to publicly reveal one's own abilities. Only those who've let their guard down with close comrades, or those with an exceptionally strong desire for self-aggrandizement, would speak of such things... In Ash's case, which one is it?

Still, he's the one who saved me. Out of courtesy, I confessed as well. "I've mastered "Annihilation' up to Basic Level 3, and "Penance' only up to Basic Level 1."

"Level 1? Are you kidding me? That's practically no different from a Trainee."

"W-well, what can I do?"

"I'm appalled. To fight the Deep Corrosion and face the Void Form with skills like that..."

Hearing that, I straightened my back. "I apologize for fighting on my own in Shogoin's jurisdiction. But it was an emergency — please forgive me."

"Don't worry about it. The Shogoin family isn't so desperate that they'd make a fuss over enemies of that caliber being snatched away."

It was true; his family was wealthy. The Shogoin family had excelled in the art of "Guardian" for generations and had successfully developed anti-Anomaly defense and detection systems. Capitalizing on that, they had expanded into comprehensive security services and were also generating revenue from the sale of anti-Anomaly armor. Of course, those are just side businesses; their main source of income is government bounties for exterminating Void Entities and Deep Corrosion. They are a large, modern clan with over 100 Domain Masters and more than 10,000 regular employees...

Ash, the heir to that clan, lowered his voice. "Just to be clear. Ryoto... you're being targeted. You can't be so incompetent that you don't realize that. And don't think this is the work of a lone perpetrator."

"So you're saying there are multiple perpetrators?"

"Of course. Targeting the heir to the Ugajin clan — it's obviously the work of a large-scale Sin Clan."

Just as Domain Warriors form clans, most Sin-bearers are organized into groups. These so-called Sin Clans have infiltrated human society and are aiding the invasion of Anomalies. Naturally, assassinating capable Domain Warriors is one of their missions. The Ugajin family, in particular, is one of Japan's leading clans. Both my father and I have executed countless Sin-bearers and annihilated innumerable Sin-clans.

There are surely countless Sin-clans swearing revenge against the Ugajin family. And I, being the son of the Commander-in-Chief — not to mention having a three-year gap in my service — am an easy target. It's no wonder they see me as a priority. To the Sin-Bearers, I'm... probably a bounty hunter they've been waiting for to be released.

As I let out a sigh, Ash spoke in a cold, ruthless tone. "Shogoin will carry out the execution for this incident."

"You're telling me not to get involved?"

"I have neither the right nor the ability to intervene. If I hadn't been here today, you would have been killed... and besides..." Suddenly, Ash's voice grew louder. "Don't you find that strange, Ryoto?"

"What is?"

"Don't play dumb. You've only been back in Japan for a few days. Even if you are the heir to the Ryō faction, there must be some other reason you were attacked so soon." Ash's toes clicked sharply. "Ryoto... Where have you been these past three years?"

"...The hospital."

"Do you really think I'd believe that? I've seen right through the false information likely spread by the Sensaki faction. But in reality, even using the Shogoin family's intelligence network, we couldn't figure out where you were at all. Why?"

You were investigating it too, weren't you? About what happened to me. For a moment... I faltered for a second.

Of course, the incident from three years ago had been covered up by the Nine Generals. No matter how extensive Ash's faction was, there was no way they could have uncovered the truth. And naturally, I had been strictly forbidden from speaking of it. Even if I had no memory, simply confessing that I'd "lost my memory" might have led to my own elimination.

I... I had a feeling that might happen. But the reason I hesitated wasn't because I was afraid. If I told the truth, it would drag Ash into it too, so I put on my usual act.

"Well, isn't it because the Shogoin clan is unreliable? They've been putting too much effort into their side jobs, so their skills in their main line of work have gone downhill. My old man said that wasn't good either."

"You're still going to play dumb? Then, Ryoto, why don't you tell me what happened three years ago?" Ash took another step closer. "I hear you were seriously injured fighting an Anomaly. But who exactly were you fighting? There's no record of the incident where you were injured in the Domain Archives, which collects every Anomaly incident from around the world."

"That happens sometimes."

"Don't be ridiculous. Every Anomaly incident humanity has ever fought is preserved there since the dawn of history. Registration errors are unthinkable, and deletion is impossible. But... the death of your Kashizaki... that, at least, is recorded."

My face tensed involuntarily.

Ash closed the distance even further. "But even that only notes the date of death. Where you fought, who you fought, and how he died... none of that is known. Anyone who looked into your records would find it suspicious. That there's something hidden behind it."

Ash cut straight to my heart without hesitation. In his own way, he must have been making moves for the past three years.

Even so, I had no choice but to evade Ash's question. "I was in the hospital for three years. It feels pointless to say anything to you, since you don't believe me."

"Ryoto, you..."

"Anyway, I'm the one being targeted. I'll be the one to take them down. I don't care if they're Sin Bearers or not. Even with a three-year gap... I was raised to be a one-man army. I'll make sure I win." Mixing lies with my true feelings, I looked at Ash.

My old friend with the gray hair looked dismayed, but managed to suppress his anger for the moment. "That's typical of the Ugajin family's "small but elite' philosophy. But if the Sin Clan is involved, you won't be able to handle it alone. I'm just warning you."

But I couldn't say that. After all, I don't know what happened either.

With that, Ash walked away. The atmosphere around us vanished like an ebbing tide. I stared out at the pitch-black sea and let out a weary sigh.

He's not going to give up, is he? It's enough that I'm the only one suffering for atonement. Ash's passion makes me feel guilty. But I can't bring myself to tell him.

When I returned to the apartment, it was unnervingly quiet inside.

Looking at the sofa, Yuri was fast asleep. She must have found it in the boxes — she was wrapped up in my blanket.

"Hey, Yuri, you..." Suddenly, I spotted a note on the dining table. Of course, it was Yuri's handwriting.

"I'm too tired tonight, so I'm staying here. I've contacted my parents, so it's fine. I'll be skipping school tomorrow, Thursday. Yuri" "W-what do you mean, it's fine?"

This is bad. Even if she is my childhood friend, letting her stay in my room... But there's no helping it. Yuri must be exhausted from using up all her Domain Factors nursing Koharu. Thinking that, I couldn't bring myself to wake her up.

I quietly made my way to the bedroom. When I opened the door, Koharu was still fast asleep. Her sleeping face lacked her usual stubbornness. If anything, she looked even more delicate than usual.

If she smiled, she might look kinda cute. Ah, no, what am I thinking... Even at a time like this... Looking closely, I saw that Koharu had beads of sweat on her forehead. Thinking she might have a fever, I gently wiped her face with a damp towel. Just then, Koharu suddenly rolled over.

"...Mmm... mmmm..."

"Koharu, are you awake?" I asked, but there was no reply. Instead, Koharu suddenly kicked off the sheets, exposing her sleeping form. In that instant...

W-wait, hold on! To my shock, Koharu had been sleeping in just her underwear. Her snow-white body, clad in white from top to bottom... no, I only saw it for a split second! I swear!

"Damn it, Yuri! You should've at least put some pajamas on her!" But since Koharu had been rushed in so suddenly, there probably weren't any clothes to put on her. I looked away and tried to pull the sheets back over her. "A-anyway, I have to cover her up quickly.....

This is a feast for the eyes... no, it's poison for the eyes! I gently pulled the sheet up. But then, Koharu suddenly grabbed my arm! Suddenly, I was dragged onto the bed. I couldn't resist Koharu's superhuman strength at all (this is true too!), and she hugged me tight in her arms.

W-what on earth is this... As I struggled, Koharu's sweet scent enveloped me. What's more, my face was pressed against her soft chest. This girl... I had no idea she was the type who looked slimmer in clothes!

Even through her underwear, the size was unmistakable. For a fifteen-year-old, it's quite... But Koharu's embrace suddenly tightened. No, it wasn't so much a hug as an intense stranglehold.

Guh, I'm suffocating!

Koharu's arms were squeezing me to the limit. With obvious murderous intent, Koharu blurted out in her sleep.

"...You bastard, Kyuko-tai... I won't let you get away!"

W-what? Is she talking in her sleep? She's really making me sweat here... No, even if that's the case, this situation is bad! If Koharu wakes up right now, what will she say?

Scenario 1: Rejection. "To force yourself unto me while I'm unconscious — how utterly shameless! Even if you are the Young Master, I cannot forgive this! You must die immediately to atone for this — prepare yourself!"

Scenario 2: From Rejection to Consent. "You mustn't! I am your humble servant, Young Master... and I'm still a freshman in high school... Ah, but... please keep tonight's events a secret..."

Scenario 3: Consent. "Be quiet... so Lady Yuri in the next room won't hear..." ."

Hmm, personally, I'd go with Scenario Two... but this isn't the time to be letting my imagination run wild! If Yuri saw that, it would be the absolute worst.

I desperately untangled myself from Koharu's arms and escaped from the cleavage. Finally, I covered Koharu with the sheets and wiped the sweat from my face. Ugh, this is exhausting... Fighting is way easier. But oblivious to all that trouble, Koharu was muttering in her sleep again.

"...Young Master... I'm so relieved you're safe..."

What are you talking about? You're the one who's safe, you know. Thinking that, I gazed at Koharu once more

I really don't like having this Kashizuki around. But I hated even more the thought of the Kashizuki dying for my sake.

Why do you protect someone like me? Me, who rejected you... And someone like me... I quietly left the bedroom. I went into an empty room and lay down quietly. It was a little cold, but I didn't care. With Koharu on my mind, I probably wouldn't be able to sleep tonight. Still, before I knew it, I had fallen asleep...

A crosswalk teeming with people. I only remember that on that day, the town was bustling with families.

I suddenly stopped in the middle of the crosswalk... Two seconds passed. I don't know what happened in those two seconds. No one remembers it, no one saw it. Two seconds lost to the world.

When I came to, he was in my arms.

"Axford!" I held him close. But his right arm was gone. He'd lost his left eye, and bright red blood was flowing from his entire body. "Axford, pull yourself together! Don't die on me!"

Even if I cried out, the result would surely be the same. Because Axford had died right then and there... Wait. Then who is it I'm holding? Just as I wondered that, I finally heard a reply. A low, hushed British accent.

"It's no use. I cannot be saved now... However, to protect you, Young Master, until my final breath is my true wish."

"Don't make a big deal out of how you die!"

"You're right... Someone once said: 'It is not how one dies, but how one lives that matters.'"

"Who is this "someone'...?"

"Samuel Butler... a 19th-century English writer. He was active in the genre of pseudo-heroic poetry, but never mind that. I wish to refute Butler's words." He let out a defiant smile. "How one dies matters, too. For us Domain Masters, at least."

"I've never heard of that writer....."

"Please read books, young master. Learning others' perspectives broadens your horizons. However, do not take false words at face value." I was bewildered by him, dripping with fresh blood.

"I don't really read books much...."

"Then you must make it a habit. They say habit becomes a second nature, and possesses ten times the power of one's innate nature."

"Who said that?"

"Now, who was it again?" He said only that, then collapsed limply. His blood-soaked body twisted and contorted, no longer even recognizable as human.

But I shook him violently. "Don't die without telling me, Axford! Hey, Axford!"

Eternal silence. When I gave up, his blood was caked onto my palm.

I tried to wipe it off. But it wouldn't come off.

I tried to wipe it off. But it wouldn't come off.

I tried to wipe it off. But it wouldn't come off.

Overcome by unbearable revulsion, I looked up at the sky.

That day, the 109 building on Dogenzaka was looking down on me as usual.

Someone, please tell me. What happened back then?

And I...

I jolted awake. The morning sun was streaming in through the window. The clock read 9:00 a.m. I wiped the sweat from my forehead.
Why does this have to happen at a time like this... It wasn't a special dream. It was the past I've seen countless times over the last three years. A farewell I could never forget. A sin I'll keep reliving.
I left the room to wash my face. Just then, Koharu appeared from the living room.
"Koharu...!"
"Good morning, Young Master. I'm so sorry about yesterday. I was supposed to protect you, but I wasn't strong enough to fulfill my duty. On top of that, you let me stay in your bedroom..."
"W-wait a second." Being apologized to out of the blue left me bewildered. "Are you... are your injuries all healed now?"
"Yes, though there's still a little... Lady Yuri's healing magic is working, though." Koharu was biting her lip tightly. I didn't know what to say either...
"Did you sleep well last night?"
"Yes, thanks to you, I slept soundly."
"Did you have any weird dreams... like being attacked by that... that... Void Form?"
"No, not at all."
"Good... Make sure you eat breakfast."
Just then, Yuri came out of the kitchen wearing an apron. "Leave it to me, Ryo-chan. Breakfast is already ready."
"Oh, sorry about that."
"Don't worry about it. By the way, Ryo-chan, you're sweating a lot. Why don't you take a shower?"
"Hmm. I guess I will."
For a moment, Koharu gave me a worried look.
I dashed into the changing room as if to escape. As I took a hot shower, the wounds I'd gotten in yesterday's battle started to hurt. But right now, more than the physical wounds...

When I saw the breakfast, I was surprised.
The breakfast Yuri had made was quite lavish: French toast, bacon and eggs, potato salad, vegetable soup, and even yogurt for dessert.
"W-Wow, this is amazing."
"Well, besides training in magic, I'm also training to be a bride. Oh, I prepared some rice porridge for Koharu-chan."
"I'm sorry, Yuri-sama... Normally, I should be the one making Young Master's meals."
"It's fine. I mean, look, I might end up making Ryo-chan's meals every day before long... hehe."
She's acting like my wife after just staying the night!
But Yuri's cooking really is delicious. As I took a bite of the toast, Yuri leaned in close. "By the way, Ryo-chan, about yesterday..."

"Ah. You're going to say I'm being targeted, aren't you?"
"You noticed?"
"Sort of. There's a Sin-Bearer in this town. However, the right to execute them lies with the Shogoin family, so I can't intervene... Ash told me that last night." I made my voice sound deliberately nonchalant. Then Koharu asked,
"So... what will you do, Young Master?"
"I'll do as I please."
"What do you mean by that?"
"It's your game theory. The Sin-Bearer's ultimate target is me, right? So no matter the process, the enemy will inevitably show up at my place. I'll get a chance to take them down before the Shogoin do."
Then Koharu quietly set down her bowl of soup. "I will accompany you in that battle."
"No way. You're injured, aren't you?"
"But there might be more than one perpetrator. If the Sin Clan is behind this, you alone won't be enough to handle it."
"You're saying the same thing as Ash, aren't you? And you sound so confident, but how much training have you actually undergone?"
When asked, Koharu bowed respectfully. "I'm ashamed to say, my tolerance level is six. "Agony' is at difficulty level four, and "Annihilation' is at level two."
"Whoa, you're better at "Agony' than I am?"
"Not at all... Young Master, you're being too modest." Koharu replied, her expression remaining stern. "I've heard that since you were a child, Young Master, you've received direct instruction from the Commander-in-Chief and the Chief Instructor. You must have trained for longer than I have... There's no way you could be inferior to me."
"But I am inferior, you see." Without a hint of remorse, I confessed. "I've only mastered "Annihilation' up to the third level, and as for "Agony,' I've only reached the first level."
"Eh..."
"What can I do? I was hospitalized for three years. I didn't have a moment to train in either "Annihilation' or "Agony.'" It stung a little. Was I going to keep up this pretense about my background?
But Koharu suddenly began to tremble violently. "For someone of the Ugajin family to know only the first level of the "Agony' technique... Isn't that the same as a trainee?"
"You're saying the same thing as Ash again."
"Of course. Or are you saying, Young Master, that this is acceptable as it is?" Koharu cut straight to the heart of the matter.
What she was asking for was his resolve as a Domain Master. Those who do not strive for mastery have no right to complain if they are accused of inaction.
I know that, too. Training is what I must do. As long as I'm being targeted, I need to get stronger. But I didn't want to go out of my way to voice those true feelings. I intended to make up for my lost time through training all on my own.
But Koharu declared her resolve with fervor. "Understood, Young Master."

"Huh? What?"
"In that case, I shall accompany you in your training."
"W-what do you mean by "accompany'?"
"I, too, will be residing in this room starting today. I will assist you in your training, so please treat me kindly."
"W-wait, in this room with me?!" I spit out my soup. Yuri choked on her toast and writhed in agony.
"Guh, guh... Wait a second, Koharu. Do you even realize what you're saying?"
"Yes, I do... I intend to share meals and sleep with Young Master, and serve by your side as your personal attendant."
"S-sharing meals and sleeping together?!"
We screamed again. But Koharu's expression didn't change. "Fortunately, Young Master's bedroom has a double bed. I suppose it's spacious enough for two of us to sleep in."
"W-what are you thinking, Koharu! What do you think would happen if you and I slept in the same bed?!"
"What do you think would happen, Young Master?"
"W-well, that would mean, that w—"
As if I could explain that in detail! Especially since last night, you... The image of Koharu in her underwear flashed through my mind. Of course, the sensation of her breasts was still fresh in my memory. If that situation continued every night...
At that moment, Yuri finally swallowed her toast. "I-it's obvious, isn't it! Ryo-chan is a boy, and Koharu-chan is a girl!"
"So what?"
"That's why... What if the devil gets into him and he attacks you, huh?!"
I had to admit that was a valid concern... But Koharu didn't let her expression waver in the slightest. "Yuri-sama... Excuse me, but that's impossible. The Young Master of the Uga Clan is not the sort of man who would be overcome by lust and attack a woman."
"T-that's quite a lot of confidence."
"Logically speaking, there's no way the Young Master would resort to such an outrage. Even if he were to commit lewd acts against me, he would lose far more in terms of honor and reputation than he would gain from it. He must surely understand a risk of that magnitude." Koharu said this with a straight face, but inwardly, I can't help but chuckle.
Hmph. You may be well-versed in game theory, but you seem clueless about male psychology, Koharu! There are times when a man's rational restraints slip away!
Just as I was thinking that Koharu's reasoning was ultimately flawed, Yuri raised her voice as well. "That's not it, Koharu-chan! Even if they understand it in their heads, their bodies just run wild — that's what teenage boys are like!" As if she could see right through me, Yuri shouted. "Plus, Ryo-chan has been in the hospital for three years, so — how should I put it? He's starved for girls, or maybe his youth has just been building up inside him — so there's a high risk he'll pounce on any girl without discrimination..."

"You've been looking at me like that?!"
"No, I wasn't! But seriously, what's your kink, Ryo-chan? Big boobs? Small boobs? Or maybe nice legs? Curvy girls? Do you prefer older women? And back then, were you the one doing the doing? Or the one getting done?"
...We're really drifting off topic here. I leaned back in my chair and scratched my head. "Listen. When someone's trying to kill you, do you really think about big boobs? My head's full of the Sin-Bearers."
"In that case, you shouldn't get attacked even if I'm right by your side."
"No, that's a different matter entirely..."
Could my line have been guided by game theory too!? But Yuri also stood up decisively. "Ryo-chan, do you really intend to let Koharu-chan live here?!"
"Uhh... well..."
"Why can't you answer right away?!"
"Aaah... uuuu..."
"Fine, do whatever you want!" With that, Yuri grabbed her bag and ran out the front door. "You idiot, Ryo! You pervert! And anyway, why did you even buy a double bed?! You planned to bring someone home from the start, didn't you?!"
"It was a coincidence, I swear!"
"I don't believe it! I can't believe you're living together in your freshman year of high school! Why don't you just sleep happily with Koharu-chan starting tonight! Bye-bye!" With a loud slam, Yuri shut the door and stormed out of the room. All that remained was an awkward atmosphere... yet Koharu still seemed completely unfazed.
"Why is Lady Yuri so angry? Did I say something strange?"
"...If you're not aware of it, then never mind."
Koharu sat on the floor, pressed her palms together, and bowed her head. "Well then, Young Master, I look forward to your care starting today."
"I haven't accepted you, and I don't know you. Once you're feeling better, go home."
"So, does that mean I'm allowed to stay here until I'm feeling better?"
"Ugh... no, that's..." I can't be that heartless. Koharu was injured twice protecting me. My feelings about refusing her service haven't changed, but kicking out someone who saved my life...
That's exactly why I hate it. Being saved by someone else is...
"Fine, just rest in this room until you're better."
"Thank you, Young Master."
"Now that that's settled, get back to your bedroom and go to sleep. I'll make lunch, so just eat whenever you like."
"But that bed is the Young Master's..."
"You're injured... Besides, how could I let another girl sleep in it? I'll sleep on the sofa."
"Our roles are reversed. It's unthinkable for a servant like me to sleep in the bed while Young Master is here."
"Just go to sleep already!" I grabbed Koharu's arm and forcefully pushed her into the bedroom. I immediately closed the door and shouted from the hallway. "Got it? Just stay put and sleep!"

"Yes... um, Young Master, about school today..."
"I'm taking the day off. I'll have them postpone the trial enlistment. I want to sort through the moving boxes, too."
"Would you like me to help?"
"Just go to sleep, please." I felt a wave of exhaustion wash over me.
How did it come to this? I'm definitely not going to be at her beck and call...
In the end, I spent the rest of the day sorting through the boxes until late at night, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. After all, it had been three years since I'd felt someone's presence so close by.
But Koharu didn't come out of her bedroom all day either. I was a little worried, but I didn't even check on her. That was my only form of resistance, though...

***

The streets of Nishihama. Night has fallen. Perhaps because of the recent attacks by the Anomalies, people heading home are walking quickly.
A figure stands in the park in front of the station... A man wearing sunglasses was looking up at Sky Palace Nishihama, but suddenly shifted his gaze.
"Come out. I know you're there." There was no reply. The man spoke without a trace of irritation. "You can't escape my gaze. The Divine Mind sees all."
"Keen eyes. As expected of Tsukasa Senzaki, the head Domain Master of the Uga family... I'm impressed you noticed our Shogoin family's surveillance." A woman in her twenties, clad in a tailored suit, appeared. She stood upright with a slender frame, her neatly trimmed bob swaying slightly.
The man... Tsukasa Senzaki, too, growled lowly. "It's you, Kiruka Sakakibara. What business does the Chief Domain Master of the Shogoin family have here?"
"I'm here as a messenger. I bring a message from the Shogoin Commander. Immediately order the Ugajin youth and Kashizuki to cease their activities in Nishihama. These are the Commander's orders."
A flat declaration. Tsukasa's voice carried a hint of resentment. "The young master fought solely to protect himself. He has no intention of disrupting the Shogoin's jurisdiction."
"Understood. The Ugajin family, a household of national stature, would never do such a thing."
"If you know that, then why..."
"A foolish question. If a young master from another family were killed within our jurisdiction, it would tarnish the Shogoin family's reputation."
The trees rustled, and the wind whistled through them. Sensaki adjusted his sunglasses. "My young master isn't that fragile."
"Bluster. Yesterday, we were pushed to the brink. The Shogoin family will launch an investigation immediately."
"Wait. The Ugajin family should handle this matter."

"Rejected. Moreover, there are various rumors circulating about the young master of the Ugajin family. The incident three years ago has far too many unexplained aspects; if there is any connection, we have no choice but to be on guard."
"...Unfounded suspicions. So the Shogoin family does suspect the Ugajin family after all."
"Affirmative. The Ugajin family is under suspicion not only from us but from factions all over the world. What happened to the Ugajin heir and Kashizuki on that day three years ago... Everyone must be wondering."
"Are you intending to discredit the Ugajin clan?"
"Negative. And even if we discuss this further, we won't reach a resolution."
"Surely you're not suggesting we convene a Commanders' Summit..."
"Affirmative. Tomorrow, Friday. The time is 6:00 p.m. at Miyakezaka."As if it had been decided in advance, Kiruka declared. Senzaki nodded solemnly.
"I'll relay this to Commander Uga. But until then, do not touch this case."
"Understood, yet I disagree. The situation is fluid, and civilian lives are at risk. The Shogoin family will respond as circumstances dictate. I cannot make any promises."
With that, Kiruka vanished without a sound, and Senzaki soon left the park as well.

*** (Translation quality may vary from here on out. My sincerest apologies) ***

"Ugh..."
I rolled over, wrapped in my blanket. Tonight, I'm sleeping on the living room sofa. It's not very comfortable, but perhaps because I'd spent the whole day sorting through my belongings, I fell into a deep sleep right away. A blissful rest without even a single nightmare... but my peaceful slumber was suddenly shattered.
"Good morning, Young Master." Koharu's voice woke me up. The light in the living room was unusually bright.
"Ugh... is it morning already?"
"Yes. It is currently 3:30 a.m."
I jumped up in anger. Looking out the window, it was still pitch black.
"Why so early... what are you thinking..."
Mid-sentence, I looked down at my body. I was wearing nothing but a pair of black boxer shorts. In other words, I was practically naked. And my crotch was clearly proclaiming the morning arousal of a fifteen-year-old boy...
Koharu was looking down at my naked body with a serious expression. "I'm glad to see you're in good spirits this morning as well, Young Master."
D-do you have to say that at a time like this?!
I hurriedly wrapped the blanket around myself.
"Y-you look pretty energetic yourself."
"Yes. Thanks to being allowed to rest all day yesterday, I'm feeling much better. It's a bit early, but I thought I'd come by to thank you."
"That's way too early!"
"Is it? ...Still, Young Master, you have a truly magnificent physique."

"Pectoralis major, biceps brachii, brachialis, pronator teres, palmaris longus...••••• The muscles from your chest to your arms are flawless. Your body fat percentage is likely under five percent..."

"S-so what?"

"Managing your physical condition is also part of Kazuki's duties. And when it comes to training, we must strengthen any weak points. For example, in your case, Young Master, your lower body seems a bit slender. Perhaps we should start with running drills."

Koharu, who had been wearing a T-shirt and shorts—I don't know where she'd been keeping them—

"No way, Koharu... Are we really doing "ascetic training' this early in the morning?"

"Of course. I cannot allow the young master to be worse at "ascetic training' than I am. First, ten laps around Nishihama Seaside Park. You'll be running about 60 kilometers."

"No way, I'm taking a break."

I snatched the blanket back and collapsed onto the sofa.

"I'll do my training at my own pace. I've had enough of the Ugajin family's Spartan education. Besides, ever since I was a kid, my dad and that Soma guy have been..."

"Huh?"

I was forced into running shorts. When did she get my clothes?!

But with a sudden burst of energy, the blanket was ripped off me. Then she shoved a T-shirt on me, dragged me to the running track, and the next moment, she had a firm grip on my collar.

"Let's go, Young Master. The Young Master of the Ugajin family should be trained in the Ugajin style."

"T-that look in your eyes means you're going to drag me there even if you have to! I can tell!"

"I won't drag you. That would be rude."

"O-oh, you're surprisingly reasonable."

"However, you'll be flying. All the way to the ground."

The moment I asked that, Koharu opened the window. The night breeze blew in from the balcony. Immediately after, she put all her strength into my collar.

"Hey, this is the twenty-seventh floor!"

But Koharu hurled me through the air with her incredible strength. Before I knew it, I was already in midair...

−No wayyyyyyyy!

Below me lay the streets of Nishihama. At 3:30 a.m., the night lights had all but vanished. I plummeted headfirst into that darkness.

−You've got to be kidding me, you b"stard!

As I fell, I focused my mind.

▼ Domain Factor, activation complete!

▼ ▼ Salos's Vigorous Limbs" Auto-activated!

▼ ▼ "Vine's Wise Eyes and Ears" Auto-activated!

The sensation of falling slowed to a crawl, and I reached out toward the apartment building's wall. The Domain Factor transferred to the wall's surface, acting as a brake to slow my descent. As the ground drew near, I twisted my body and landed in the apartment's parking lot!

"H-huff... Was that guy trying to kill me?!"

Then, Koharu plummeted down from my room as well. Her blonde hair flowing behind her, she too channeled domain factors from her fingertips and landed.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Young Master. C-come on, let's begin your training."

"Y-you, listen!"

"Shouting like that disturbs the neighbors. C-come on, Young Master, I'll run with you too,"

Saying this, Koharu held out my running shoes. I wanted to refuse at all costs, but I couldn't win against Koharu with my bare hands.

"Fine... Just for today, just for today."

In the still-dark streets, I reluctantly started running.

The training of "Austere Discipline" is based on physical conditioning. Even if you strengthen your body with magic, if your physique is fragile, it won't be able to withstand the strain of the spells.

With "Salos's Vigorous Limbs" and "Vain's Wise Senses" activated, I sprinted through Nishihama Seaside Park. I actually finished the 60 kilometers Koharu had set in about an hour.

For an ordinary person, it would be enough exercise to cause cardiac arrest... but the fact that I didn't reach that point was, after all, thanks to the benefits of magic.

However, I had lost a large amount of Domain Factors, and I was extremely fatigued. This was also due to my three-year hiatus... but I didn't want to keep making excuses. Deep down, I knew the truth. I needed to start over from the basics...

"Well done on finishing the run, Young Master. However, there seems to be some waste in how you're channeling your Domain Factors."

With the rising sun over Tokyo Bay behind us, Koharu declared. "Is it because the ground is sand? Your focus is too concentrated on your lower body. Even while running, you must maintain control over the flow of your Domain Factors."

"Ah, ah, is that so~~~"

I collapsed onto the sand. The ocean glowed orange in the morning sun, and the air felt pleasant. Since landscape and water quality conservation efforts had been underway in this area for a long time, even though it was Tokyo Bay, the coastline remained beautiful.

——Still, there are quite a few of them.

I was also aware of the presences lurking around me. They were likely the Shogoin family's surveillance. Even though I thought I'd concealed my presence, I could sense an overwhelming number of them.

——It's Ash's doing.

——There are a lot of them, but if the opponent is really the Sin Clan, it's only natural.

——With this many, even the Sin-Bearers wouldn't dare interfere, but... .

As I was thinking, Koharu turned to me.
"Young Master, is something wrong?"
"No, nothing at all. More importantly, is it time for the next exercise?"
"Indeed. We'll be doing 100 sparring drills, and once that's done, more running..."
"W-wait a sec. It's been a while since I've done Uga-shin-ryu special training myself. Let me rest a bit." "Are you tired from sorting out the move, Young Master?"
"Well, I've been at it from morning till night. Even this morning, you forcibly..."
"I'm terribly sorry. Last night, while resting in bed, I couldn't stop thinking about your training."
"Even so, pushing me out of the room was going too far. We're on the 27th floor, you know."
"It's not about the floor number. If Young Master is motivated, even the 50th floor should be fine."
"You really love training, don't you? Well, if I put my mind to it, even the 50th floor wouldn't be a problem."
"As expected of Young Master. You're so reliable."
"Anyway, at least let me have some water. Even though it's April, it's pretty hot this morning."
"Understood. If it's water, here you go."
Koharu took a bottle of mineral water out of the backpack she was carrying. The label read, "Natural Water from the Sakurano Mountain Range"... I instinctively snatched it from her.
"Wow, this brings back memories! They still sell this?"
"Yes. When it comes to water, Sakurano is the best."
"Well then, I'll take it."
I took a sip of the cold water. My thirst was quenched, and I finally caught my breath.
Glancing to my side, I saw Koharu drinking from the same bottle. But at the sight of her, I momentarily forgot my fatigue.
Koharu was standing with her back to the sea. The water's surface, reflecting the morning sun, shone like a halo, and her wind-swept blonde hair swayed.
With her eyes closed, Koharu sipped from the bottle. Her profile was striking, and every time her throat moved as she drank, my own heart raced.
What's more, Koharu's white T-shirt was damp with sweat, and I could see right through to her underwear. The shape of her breasts—which I'd touched last night—was completely obvious... To hide my agitation, I turned my head away.
"Uh, um, Koharu..."
"Yes, Young Master?"
"Well, um... you should probably wipe that sweat off."
"Thank you for your concern."
"If possible, you should change your T-shirt too."
"Unfortunately, I don't have a spare. I'm fine just as I am."
"No, but..."
I was at a loss for words.
With Koharu looking like that...

−I was about to face her and spar.
Oh no, if Koharu sweats even more...
Just then, Koharu stepped in front of me.
"Is something wrong, Young Master?"
"N-no, nothing."
"There's a disturbance in the flow of your domain factors. You seem a bit unsettled."
"Th-that's just your imagination. You still have a lot to learn!"
"Your face also appears to be flushed. Is that a mistake as well?"
Koharu peered closely at my face, as if to confirm. Her eyes were mesmerizing. Her small lips looked like sweet fruit. Her sweat-soaked T-shirt and the underwear showing through were even more...
Koharu took my hand.
"Ah, ah..."
"Now, let's begin sparring, Young Master. I won't go easy on you."
I was surprised by the feel of Koharu's fingertips as well. Her touch was far from rough; it was slender and delicate. A girl's fingers, after all... The moment I thought that, I made up my mind.
-I cannot allow myself to be protected by these fingers.
−I must never hurt her again.
−To ensure that, I must...
I cast a glance over the streets of Nishihama.
He's somewhere in this town. The one who cornered me twice...

***

El Diablo: Urgent Progress Report
From: God of the Underworld. Subject: Progress Report. From: God of the Underworld. Subject: Progress Report.
"Good work. How are things going since then? I haven't received any emails since yesterday's attack, so I'm worried you might have been counterattacked. Please get in touch as soon as possible."

From: Rusted Nail. Subject: Re: Progress Report.
"I apologize for causing you concern. I myself am unharmed. It's just that the Shogoin family has started moving, so I've been scrambling to hide. I'm sorry (bows deeply with emoji).'
El Diablo

Sender: God of the Underworld. Subject: Relieved.
"Escaping unscathed—that's typical of you, Rusty Nail (laughing emoji). However, the real problem is the Ugajin family. It would be troublesome if that faction invaded Nishihama, so I'll take care of it before midnight.'

Sender: Rusty Nail. Subject: Thanks for the backup.

"Count on me. If it's just the Shogoin family, we can handle it on our own. If we destroy all of Ugajin Ryoto's cards as planned, that should do the trick."

Sender: God of the Underworld. Subject: Finally.
"We're really in a tight spot, aren't we? (laughing emoji again). With this, we'll become the first people in the world to get to the bottom of the mystery of Ugajin Ryoto. Of course, it's a first in both this world and the other world."

Sender: Rusted Nail. Subject: World First.
"That's right. Some of my acquaintances doubt the very existence of the Gag Incident, but I believe in Meikai-sama's deductions."

Sender: Meikai-sama. Subject: What worries me is...
"Thanks (laughing emoji). Well, even the skeptics will change their tune once we uncover the truth. More importantly, how's that Kashizuki girl doing? I think the second attack was aimed at her."

Sender: Rusty Nail. Subject: Stay tuned.
"You're spot on. I observed the two of them training this morning. Ryoto Ugajin is so desperate to fill the gap in his training that he hasn't noticed a thing. He hasn't noticed that Kashizuki's daughter is pushing herself too hard (mocking emoji)."

【Phase.4: Like an Immortal Colossus】

"Wait, Young Master!"
Friday morning. The slope in front of the school. I'm walking up the row of cherry trees in full bloom. Koharu blocked my path.
"Please refrain from going out. What do you intend to do if you're attacked again?"
"I'll fight back then."
Ignoring Koharu, I hurried on.
"Shutting myself in my room isn't my style. So I'll act as bait myself and draw the enemy out."
Yes, I had made up my mind. I don't even know who the enemy is or where they are. It would take time to search for them, and the Shogoin family might execute the culprit before I do.
If I wanted to find the enemy quickly...
I'd just have to become living bait.
But Koharu stepped in front of me again.
"It's far too risky. For you, Young Master, to act as bait yourself..."
"You let me go out this morning, didn't you?"
"Early morning training is different. I thought that at that time and in that place, I wouldn't be bothering anyone... "But if you go to school..."
I understand Koharu's reasoning. It's true that if I were attacked, it would cause trouble for the school again.

Even if every student is a user of the Nine Realms, that's something that simply can't be allowed.

"You're right, I shouldn't go to school. But I have to at least tell Teacher Izana why I'm absent."

"A phone call should suffice for that."

"But..."

At the very least, I wanted to see Morikita-san in person and apologize. I'm surely causing trouble for the shop... I intended to leave school immediately once I'd taken care of that.

But when I reached the school gate, I was greeted by an eerie silence.

"It's unusually quiet this morning... and..."

There wasn't a single member of the Gakuto Squad trying to recruit me. There were other students arriving for school, but none of them seemed to notice me. If anything, I sensed...

"Young Master, everyone seems a bit... off..."

Koharu also looked around suspiciously. Just then, Mii-san, the class representative, emerged from inside the school. On her left arm was an armband reading "First Jurisdiction."

"Good morning, Uga-kun, Matsushita-san."

"Oh, Mii-san... Did you really join the First Jurisdiction?"

"Nope, I'm still just a candidate. I passed the interview, but I can't officially join until I complete the training period."

"Sounds just like a regular office worker."

When I said that, Mii-san's expression hardened.

"Anyway, Uga-kun, they said you can go home already today. Sorry to have you come all this way for nothing."

"Wait a second. What does that mean?"

"Oh, you haven't read it yet? It's written right there."

Mii-san pointed to the bulletin board next to the school gate. When I went closer, at the very top of the posted notice were the four letters S•T•N•H—meaning it was a proclamation addressed to the "Students and Teachers of Nishihama High School."

"Administrative Order No. 638: Class 1-A student Ryoto Uga-gami is designated as a Level A Anomalous Encounter Risk. Until further notice, this student is prohibited from attending school. Ash Shogoin, Captain of the First Administrative Combat Squad."

"An order..."

As I groaned, Mii nodded deeply.

"Captain Shogoin issued the proclamation yesterday. Ryoto Uga is being targeted by either a Sin-Bearer or a Sin Clan.

It's a precaution to prevent that danger from affecting the other students."

"But even so..."

"Yeah, I get that you're upset about having this decided for you. But if you really want to come to school, you'll have to ask Captain Shogoin directly. I don't know if he'll give permission, though..."

I fell silent for a moment. This was Ash's answer. His own way of sending a message to me for not telling him the truth. But there was nothing I could do, so I asked, sounding distressed.

"Can't I just go into class for five minutes?"

"If you get attacked in those five minutes... it'll be my responsibility."

"I just want to see Morikita-san, at least, and apologize."

"Morikita-san's not here today."

"What...?"

"Since yesterday. She said she's too busy fixing up the shop to come to school."

The moment she said that, Mii-san lowered her eyes.

".....I know I'm a burden, too."

"Mii-san....."

"I'm sorry. But most of the students here, myself included, are just trainees. Our abilities are worlds apart from Uga-kami-kun's... If you get attacked, you'll just get dragged into it."

I stared into Mii-san's eyes. And finally, I realized.

−Mii-san saw my battle with the Void Form.

−She also saw the moment Koharu nearly died.

——She must have realized it then...

Users of the Nine Realms are always realistic. If you don't assess your own strength, you won't survive. Especially against an enemy that gave Koharu and me such a hard time. Mii understood that a Trainee wouldn't stand a chance.

——I can't bring myself to blame her for that.

——Everyone values their own life.

I exhaled deeply. Don't worry about it. She must have known herself that she shouldn't have come to school. It's unreasonable to get angry just because Mii told her so.

"I get it. I'm going home today."

"....."

"Tell Ash for me. I'm going to lay low for a while."

I pushed against the crowd and walked out the school gate. As I walked down the avenue of cherry trees, the number of students only increased.

−It's like a sea of people.

−And it's so... quiet.

No one spoke to me. On the contrary, some even openly avoided me. Countless glances feared being caught in the crossfire.

I had been cut off from the everyday life I'd just regained. The moment I realized I'd been isolated, I felt like laughing at myself.

−That's strange.

"Even though I spent three years in solitary confinement..."

"I never thought I'd feel this lonely..."

Apparently, loneliness and isolation are two different things.
But just as I realized that, a strand of blonde hair drifted gently before me. I could smell the scent of her hair. The girl who appeared amidst the falling cherry blossoms led the way for me, just as she always did.
"I'll go with you, Young Master."
""I'll go with you'... I'm the only one banned from school. You should go to school."
"No. I can't leave you alone, Young Master."
A stubborn refusal. Koharu pushed through the crowd in my place, seemingly unconcerned about the students dodging her.
Koharu's back as she walked down the cherry blossom-lined path seemed strangely reassuring.

***

"You sent Ryo-chan home?!"
Yuri Mirokuji grabbed Mitsuya Kataoka by the collar.
"Is that true, Mii-san?!"
"Y-yeah... We got orders from the First District... Matsushita-san went home with him, too."
"Even Koharu-chan?!"
At Mii-san's words, Class 1-A erupted into chaos just before the start of class.
"Well, if it's an order from the First Directorate, I guess there's nothing we can do."
"But it's not Uga-kun's fault, you know."
"But we don't want to get dragged into this."
"We're still just trainees, after all."
Hearing the murmurs of resignation, Yuri tried to shout something.
But as if to stop her, Yano Elhiko stood up.
"So we're not going to get close to Ugajin either. When he comes back to school, we'll just spout some nonsense like, "We were worried about you, Ugajin-kun,
let's work together again starting today!' or something like that. Relying on him only when it's convenient. If possible, teaming up with Ugajin in the Gakuto Squad just to get the high bounty. Is that it?"
Elhiko scanned the classroom, twirling his Combat Razor. The classroom began to buzz with murmurs again.
"That's not gonna fly."
"It totally reeks of being in it for the money."
"Just like those rich upperclassmen."
"Ugajin-kun saved me and Okuzono-san from the Deep Corrosion, too."
"I'd like to at least say thank you, too."
"But that level of Deep Corrosion—wasn't it nothing to Ugajin?"
"No. If Matsushita-san hadn't come to help, we would've been in real trouble."
"Besides, this town is under Seigoin's jurisdiction. If we're not careful, they might pick a fight with us, and we could even get kicked out of this school..."
For a moment, silence fell over the class.

As Yuri stared silently, someone's voice eventually began to rise again.
"Thinking about it now... Uga-sama really fought hard for us, didn't he? On the day of the entrance ceremony."
"Yeah. To save us."
"Even though it was the very first day we met him."
"We could've just left it to the Shogoin family."
"And just... leave Uga-sama and Matsushita-san alone?"
Buzz, buzz, buzz! Everyone in Class 1-A shook their heads.
"That's... unacceptable, as human beings!"
"But what can we do?"
"You idiot, that's exactly what we need to figure out!"
Then Elhiko smiled contentedly.
"Anyway, let's at least stand by Ugajin, just us Class 1-A. That's what classmates are for, right, everyone?"
"Ooh!" Class 1-A responded. The sense of class solidarity that had sprung up out of nowhere was strangely intense.
That fervor surrounded the trembling Mii-san.
"It's all Mii-san's fault anyway!"
"That's right! For a class representative!"
"Protect Ugajin and Matsushita!"
"First District's lapdog!"
"Stop it! Verbal abuse will just make masochist Mii-san happy!"
Cornered in the corner of the classroom, Mii shrunk back.
"But I have... the mission of the First District..."
At that moment, the classroom door slowly swung open.
Standing there was a tall upperclassman with gray hair. The male student, with his dignified features, spoke in a commanding voice.
"You're not wrong, Cadet Kataoka."
"Captain Shogoin!"
Shogoin Ash, who had appeared, entered the classroom, ignoring the hostility of Class 1-A.
"I commend you for carrying out your orders without letting your relationship as classmates influence you. Thanks to your actions, order within the school will be maintained."
"C-Captain..."
"As for the matter of Ryoto Uga-gami, the Shogoin family will handle it off-campus. I'll allow you to participate in that operation. Consider it a reward for your service this time."
Mii's eyes welled up with tears of emotion. However, Class 1-A erupted in a resolute chorus of boos.
"Lift Uga-gami's suspension!!"
"Lift it! Lift it! Lift it! Lift it!"
But Ash glared at their chanting.

"Then, can you lot protect Ugajin? Can you defeat the enemies that even Ugajin struggled with?"
"....."
"Don't demand the impossible. If you want to act like grown-ups, get stronger first."
Faced with Ash's piercing gaze, Class 1-A fell silent. However, only Yuri stepped forward before the First Division Captain.
"Shogoin-kun, wait a second."
"It's been a while, Yuri. But on campus, you should call me "senpai'."
"I get it, Shogoin-senpai. But please, at least let us—Class 1-A—help Ryō-chan."
"It's dangerous, and besides, it's probably unnecessary. Ryōto is under the Shogoin family's surveillance."
"But you're not guarding him inside his room, are you? What if he's attacked in his sleep?"
"In that case, we have that loyal servant. That girl never leaves Ryoto's side."
"Koharu-chan got hurt. At least let me go back to support Ryō-chan..."
At that, Ash's eyebrow twitched.
"You're really fixated on this... Are you that worried about Ryoto and Kashizuki's relationship?"
"I-I'm not really..."
"I suppose you'd be worried. After all, those two are living together."
"Huh?"
At those words, Class 1-A began to buzz with excitement.
"Wait, really? That's news to me~"
"Ugajin and Matsushita-san are living together?"
"But isn't that just living together, not cohabiting?"
"Yeah, but with Young Master and Kashizuki, it wouldn't be surprising."
Yuri also spoke, suppressing her mixed feelings.
"Y-yes. It's strictly just living together. For Lord Waka and Shizuki, living together is only natural, right?"
"Well, I thought so too, but..."
"I received a report from a subordinate. This morning, when those two went out for a walk, they had this conversation..."
"Are you tired, Lord Waka?'
"It's been non-stop from morning till night. Even this morning, you forced me to...'
"It's just that last night, I was thinking only of you, Young Master, while in bed."
"That's too much. Twenty-seven times."
"It's not about the number. If you're up for it, Young Master, fifty times should be fine."
"You really do love it, don't you? Well, if I really put my mind to it, fifty times wouldn't be a problem."
"As expected of you, Young Master. You're so reliable."
After finishing his sentence, Ash stroked his chin.
"So, anyway, a conversation like this... •••••• Hmm, what's wrong, Yuri?"
Yuri's face turned pale, and she collapsed backward with a thud. The girls in the class rushed to catch her.

"Miroku-san, pull yourself together!"
"No way... no way... That Ryo-chan and Koharu-chan are already in that kind of relationship..."
"Pull yourself together! It's some kind of mistake!"
Furthermore, a despair-filled scream rose from the boys in the class.
"N-no wayyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"
"That seemingly stiff-necked Matsushita-san! That Matsushita-san with the beautiful blonde hair and that aloof profile I can't get enough of—to think she's all lovey-dovey at night!"

"No, I don't believe it! Matsushita-san isn't that kind of girl... b-but just imagining it... ugh
Oh, that Ugajin! That Ugajin, ugh!"
"But, as expected of Ugajin! To pull off 27 rounds without even trying... I really respect him!"
"I'm done for. Not just as a Domain Master, but as a man, I've been completely defeated..."
"So the urban legend about "Ascetic' Domain Masters having boundless stamina wasn't just a myth after all!"
"Wait, did Ugajin go twenty-seven times? Or was it Matsushita-san?"
"Don't say any more! The Matsushita in my head is getting perverted by the second... gah!"
"How dare you! How dare you have such fantasies! But in my head too... gah!"
"You know, boys really do love escaping into their fantasies, don't they~"
The girls shot exasperated glances at the boys collapsing all over the place.
Ash Shogoin also ran a hand through his hair.
Training
"Anyway, I've made my point. There's no need to support Ryoto Ugajin. Everyone should focus on training within the school. That's all."
But Class 1-A's interest had already shifted to the birth of their first couple, and Yuri Miroku-ji was merely muttering to herself...

***

"I guess... I really did cause trouble."
I looked at the shop with a sigh.
The windows of "Lapis Lazuli" were shattered, and the furnishings inside had been knocked over. I'd come straight from school just to confirm this, but...
−It's a mess everywhere.
"Lapis Lazuli" wasn't the only shop that had suffered damage. The shopping district in front of the station was still busy cleaning up after the disaster, and many stores still had their shutters down.
"I'm sorry, Morikita-san. That Hollow from the other day was targeting me..." "No, it's not your fault, Uga-kun."
Morikita-san greeted us wearing an apron. Her eyes looked strangely sorrowful. She looked up at me, then immediately lowered her gaze.
Then Koharu clenched her fingers as well.
"No, it's my fault. If I'd been able to defeat that Hollow Body sooner, this wouldn't have happened..."
I felt the same way. I felt pathetic for failing to defeat a single Hollow. I wanted to apologize not just to Morikita-san, but to everyone in this town.
Just then, Saori-san emerged from inside the shop.
"Both of you, look up. It's not your fault."
"....."

"And you know, everyone in the shopping district says that it's only because Ryoto and the others fought that the damage was kept to this level..."
"Really...?"
"It's true. Just between us, the Shogoin family arrived late, too... By the way, what about school today?"
"W-well..."
When asked, I found it hard to explain. After all, I'm still being targeted. For Morikita-san's sake, it's better if I don't get too close...
Morikita-san greeted us wearing an apron. Her eyes looked strangely sorrowful. She looked up at me, then immediately lowered her gaze.
Then Koharu clenched her fingers as well.
"No, it's my fault. If I'd been able to defeat that Void Form sooner, this wouldn't have happened..."
I feel the same way. I feel pathetic for not being able to defeat a single Void Form. I want to apologize not just to Morikita-san, but to everyone in this town.
Just then, Saori-san emerged from inside the shop.
"Both of you, look up. It's not your fault."
"....."
"Besides, it's only because Ryoto-kun and the others fought that the damage was limited to this extent..... Everyone in the shopping district is saying so."
"I can't believe it..."
Arrival
Late
"It's true. Just between us, the Shogoin family was late arriving... By the way, what about school today?"
"W-well..."
When asked, I found it hard to explain. After all, I'm still being targeted. If I care about Morikita-san, I shouldn't get too close...
But as if sensing my hesitation, Koharu stepped forward.
"I've come to help. I heard Morikita-san's shop was in trouble."
"Koharu..."
I never expected her to say that. If I stayed here, I might drag Morikita-san into this again... but seeing the state of the shop, I couldn't just go home like this.
"I'm asking you too. We won't feel right unless we do something."
"Thank you, both of you. Normally I'd ask you to hold off, but... I haven't finished cleaning up yet, so I can't even open the shop. Misora can't go to school either... So, would it be okay if I asked you to help?"
"Well, leave it to us."
And so, Koharu and I began helping with the repairs at "Lapis Lazuli."
I carried debris out of the store and brought in new furniture. Once that was done, I rearranged the potted plants, repaired the cracked exterior walls, and replaced the gutters... ...and we tackled a mountain of work.
I see—this really is too much for just two women.

Koharu is tidying up the shop with Ms. Morikita. They're clearing away broken dishes and restocking the shelves with picture books...
like "Usami-chan the Rabbit" and "Gumi and Guma". I wonder if that's Ms. Morikita's hobby.
"Ms. Matsushita, could you help me move this table?"
"I can handle this on my own. You can step aside..... Hmph! (She grits her teeth and lifts the table with one hand.)"
"Whoa, that's amazing!"
.....Well, if they're happy about Koharu's superhuman strength, I'm happy too. Saori was smiling at the sight as well.
"I'm so glad you guys came, Ryoto... Misora looked a little lonely."
"Well, I'd be shocked too if my shop got destroyed."
"Yeah. But it wasn't just that... I was worried about you, Ryoto. After all, you were in danger right in front of me."
Oh, I see...
That's why she was looking at me like that earlier...
I stared at Morikita-san. She was petite, with tiny hands, and didn't smile much, but when she did, it was a childlike smile. She gave the impression that she might break if you touched her.
I'd made her worry about me. Now, a sense of self-loathing was creeping in.
"I... I won't be able to stop by this shop for a while."
"Huh? Why?"
"I don't want to... cause you any trouble ever again."
"Please, don't call him that..."
"Hehe, sorry, sorry."
"Huh?"
Saori laughed and tried to get back to work. But after taking a few steps, she suddenly turned around.
"Hey, Ryoto..."
"What's your father like?"
I was at a loss for words for a moment. But I answered as the thought came to me.
"He's just a pain in the ass, that old man."
"I suppose that's how it is..."
Hearing her reply, I pictured that man for the first time in a long while. I haven't seen him in three years. Even after returning to Japan, I haven't gone to say hello. He must be furious by now. In that town, Sakurano...

***

He was a giant of a man. His footsteps thudded, thudded, as if he might break through the floor.
He stood 205 centimeters tall and weighed 125 kilograms. For over thirty years, he had honed his body to the extreme, surviving countless brushes with death—a physique of sheer, unyielding power.

His unshaven face bore the gaze of a predator. A heat like a mirage radiated from his massive frame.

Yet the man wore a navy-blue happi coat that seemed completely out of place. On his back was a circular design with the character for "God" dyed in relief, and on his feet, he wore nothing but geta sandals.

But regardless of his appearance, this man's reputation was undoubtedly unmatched in Japan. Fewer than five people in history have ever returned alive from that world. That is why his reputation is "The Solitary Return"—and there is another...

"Was it you who summoned the "Ascetic Steel Emperor'?"

He pushed open the double doors and groaned in a voice filled with resentment.

It was a lounge offering a panoramic view of Ginza's nightscape. The carpet laid out in the room was thick enough to bury one's ankles, and luxurious black leather sofas were arranged in neat rows.

Chiyoda Ward, Hayabusa-cho, Tokyo. Facing the Sakurada Moat of the Imperial Palace and located north of Nagatacho, home to the National Diet Building, stood the headquarters of the United Japanese Factions. Commonly known as Miyakezaka. It was the general headquarters overseeing the 1,000 factions that protected Japan, a fortress of nine domains protected by multiple layers of "Guardian" magic.

In the lounge on the top floor of that headquarters, the man who had been waiting bowed deeply.

"I apologize, Mr. Ugajin. However, this is a matter of urgency. Please, have a seat."

Shogoin Zeku, head of the Shogoin family. Thirty-six years old. Ash's father had long silver hair reaching down to his waist and was dressed in a custom-made suit.

His skin was as white as powdery snow, and his ring-adorned fingers were supple. With a appearance that could easily be mistaken for a woman's, he did not look at all like a father with a child. He was a tall, slender man of an otherworldly beauty.

The imposing figure slowly made his way to the sofa.

"You're dressed rather mundanely today, Shogoin."

"I had no choice. I was summoned again today by the government's Economic Advisory Committee. These days, the Nine Realms aren't just fighting anomalies."

With that, the imposing figure pulled a champagne cooler toward him. Inside the bucket-shaped cooler, a bottle of Taittinger—the champagne favored by successive French presidents—was submerged in ice.

The giant gripped the sealed bottle and crushed the neck with his rock-hard fingers. Instantly, it fizzed. Champagne gushed out forcefully.

He drank directly from the spout, gulping it down in big gulps. At the same time, the giant exhaled a hot breath.

A sound could be heard. He was crunching the shards of the bottle as well.

"Not the Nine Realms. If you're Japanese, use an ancient name. Call yourself Gokudo."

"You're the only one who uses a name like that. You're still as old-fashioned as ever. That must be hard on Sensaki, too. Why don't you let him branch off on his own soon?" "

"He says he still wants to continue his training."

"It's nice to be so admired."

"Enough small talk. Get to the point."
Zeku nodded and leaned back on the sofa.
"Your son was attacked by a Sin-Bearer. The Shogoin family has confirmed the perpetrator's trail and is already working to pinpoint their location."
"If it's my son, he'll surely exact his revenge."
"That's impossible. He's already been attacked twice, and both times he was outmaneuvered."
The moment he heard this, the giant's hand flung the champagne cooler. It smashed against the wall. Ice scattered across the floor.
"That's only natural after three years away from actual combat. For now, I've had Ash issue a suspension from school. I'll also have my son take command of the execution. He's still inexperienced, but it's about time I gave him a chance to prove himself."
But the giant roared like a man-eating tiger.
"There is no such thing as "standing by' for the Ugajin. I'm sending my elite troops to Nishihama. First, Grand Master Soma, then Sensaki and Chisato..."
"Wait a moment. I can't have my jurisdiction being ravaged. More importantly, please tell me why your son was targeted."
"As the heir to the Steel Emperor, there are many who would seek to take his life."
"I don't believe that's the only reason. Both he and I suspect that the incident from three years ago is involved."
Though the mighty man's expression remained unchanged, he clamped his mouth shut. Zeku, maintaining his composure, continued.
"Mr. Ugajin, are you aware of this rumor? Apparently, for hundreds of years, there has been a secret in this world known as the "Mouth Incident.' Despite being an incident involving Anomalies, for some reason, it was never recorded in the Domain Archives, and all traces of it were reportedly erased."
"It's nothing but a rumor."
"Is that so? Take, for instance, the incident three years ago in which your son was involved and his retainer died... .....the details of which have still not been made public. It hasn't even been revealed where your son has been for the past three years."
"My heir has been recuperating in a hospital."
"But the name of that hospital hasn't been made public either. Could it be that the "Gag Incident' actually exists, and that the incident your son was involved in is, in fact, the "Gag Incident'?"
"That's a ridiculous theory."
"The rumors go even further. They say the ones sealing away that "Gag Incident' are none other than those who rule the Nine Realms... the Nine Army Commanders. In other words... Mr. Ugajin, that's you."
Zeku finally leaned forward from the sofa.
"You are one of the Nine Generals, Ugajin. Japan's proudest and strongest Domain Master... no, you are the one who survived a rare anomaly—a feat unseen in

history. It was only natural that you were chosen as one of the Nine Generals... but could it be that you are involved in covering up the incident involving your son?"

"....."

"What on earth is going on? Why was Ryoto Uga-gami targeted, and why did his retainer die? And I'd like you to tell me why he's being targeted again now. We need the truth if we're to protect Nishihama."

Zeku's finger scraped sharply across the table.

But five seconds, then one second passed... the burly man remained silent. A killing intent that repelled all comers and an expression resembling a mask were frozen on his face.

Then, suddenly, the entrance door swung open.

"As stubborn as ever, Ugajin."

""Don't...' No, Uncle Miroku-ji."

Instinctively, the burly man leaped to his feet.

The figure who appeared was a small, elderly man. He leaned on his cane, wearing a crumpled, deeply wrinkled smile. His head was balding, and his hunched back looked utterly frail. Yet the old man stood beside Zeku with a spring in his step.

"Give it up, Shogoin. This man's been like this since he was a kid. He'll never change his resolve."

"But, retired Master of Miroku-ji..."

"It's called the "Gag Incident' for a reason. Even if it really happened, there's no way he'd talk about it.

If someone who would talk was involved, they'd have been eliminated long ago."

Chuckling, the old man took his seat.

"But since you won't spill the beans, I'll leave this matter to Shogoin."

"Uncle...!"

"I understand how you feel, but I'm telling you to stop dragging Ryō into this. If something strange happens again, my granddaughter Yuri will be heartbroken."

"....."

"Don't you dare send Ugajin's men to Nishihama either. Kasizuki alone is enough to guard Ryoto."

Then the old man smiled with his toothless mouth.

"I've told Ryoto. He's not allowed to go out at all tomorrow. Not just school. Don't let him go into town either."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Tomorrow will be a massive manhunt."

At those words, the burly man's hair stood on end.

"Shogoin, you... ・・・・・"

"I told you just now. We've begun pinpointing their location."

Zeku calmly interlaced his slender fingers.

"Tomorrow, we're raiding the fugitive's hideout. Until it's over, Ryoto had better keep a low profile."

"Are you mocking the Ugajin?"

"If you tell us the truth, that's a different story. But if not, we'll have no choice but to execute him ourselves. That's the safest option. For the citizens of Nishihama, that is."

The old man poked the burly man's foot with the tip of his cane.

"I heard that guy with the "Ryo' in his name stopped by a coffee shop on his way home from school. What the hell is he thinking, being a target like that? I won't stand for anyone causing trouble for others."

"Is this all your uncle's doing?"

"That's right. I won't let you say otherwise. It's just one day of patience. If you can't even endure that much, you're not fit to carry the Ugajin name."

There was no ferocity in the old man's eyes. Yet there was a strength that would not be shaken by anything. The burly man angrily pulled out his long pipe and clamped it between his teeth, still unlit.

"I'll tell you this: the heir to the Steel Emperor is the "Arbitrary Tactician.'"

"So what?"

"Behind-the-scenes maneuvering and agreements won't hold him back ..... Just like the Steel Emperor."

Zeku could only shrug his shoulders; he was, after all, the king of the outlaws.

***

The lights came on in the town of Nishihama. The shopping street in front of the station was teeming with people hurrying home and shoppers. Amidst the crowd, Morikita-san gave me a small wave.

"Ugajin-kun... see you at school again..."

"Yeah, see you later, Morikita-san."

"Yeah... Come by for coffee sometime."

In the end, we helped repair "Lapis Lazuli" until evening and were treated to Morikita-san's homemade omelet rice. After dinner, of course, we had the Mandheling brewed by Saori... Savoring the aftertaste, I waved back at Morikita-san.

--Thank you.

--Even though I'm the one who caused trouble.

Knowing that my life was being targeted, she let me back into the shop. Even though I might have been attacked by the Assassins again today and dragged her into it...

--How should I respond?

--To Morikita-san and Saori-san's kindness...

--As a Domain Master... I...

After pondering for a moment, I spoke up.

"I'm sorry about this morning... Koharu. You and Mii were right. I shouldn't have gone to school."

"Young Master..."

"On the contrary... right now, I'm not even allowed to walk the streets."

I continued without looking at Koharu's face.

"Here I am, lecturing you, and look at the state I'm in. I'm causing trouble for the people of this town."
"....."
"I'm going to head back to my room right away tonight and go to bed. You're just getting over being sick, aren't you? You should get some rest early tonight."
I thought I'd said it naturally. But as soon as I finished speaking...
"Eh... ....Koharu?"
Suddenly, my hand was clasped by Koharu's fingers. A soft touch. Yet it held a force that brooked no argument.
"What the hell, out of nowhere....."
But ignoring my protest, Koharu pulled my hand and led me into the grove of trees in the park in front of the station. Even though it was still early, there were couples cuddling here and there.
"This spot will do."
"Koharu, you..."
In the dim light, Koharu pressed my back against a large tree.
"Be quiet. We can't have the Shogoin Domain Guards hearing us."
Indeed, I could still sense their watchful presence. It had been going on for so long that I'd almost forgotten they were there. As the night breeze rustled through the trees, Koharu looked up at me.
"What did you say?"
"...I can't stand such obvious lies, Young Master."
"Don't underestimate me. We've been together for so long now. I can see through that much."
I was shaken. Hiding my unease, I turned my face away. But Koharu's gaze was unwavering once again.
"When did I lie?"
"Just now. You have no intention of sleeping peacefully..."
"I'm not leaving this room. I don't want to cause trouble for anyone anymore."
"Put another way... as long as you're not causing trouble, you must want to fight. Against the Sin-Bearers."
Above us, the treetops rustled. Koharu's blonde hair fluttered in the night breeze.
"The town of Nishihama is vast. If you avoid the city center and schools and choose the dead of night, there must be some deserted places. Patrol those areas alone tonight to lure the enemy out... or search for the Accuser's hideout... That must be what you're thinking, Young Master."
I looked up at the night sky. Surprisingly, the stars were exceptionally clear tonight.
"...Is that also the conclusion of your strategic thinking?"
"If I cannot read the Young Master's thoughts, I cannot fulfill my duty as your attendant."
"Then what should I do? This is my case. How can I not handle it myself?"
I found myself getting irritated. It was pointless to take it out on Koharu, though...
Then Koharu spoke quietly.

"We should still start by considering the enemy's final strategy. Most likely, they plan to strike down the Young Master here in Nishihama... We simply need to ruin their preparations."
"How on earth are we supposed to..."
"Tonight, you and I should leave Nishihama. We'll pretend we're returning to Sakurano..."
"I see. They won't follow us."
"It would be problematic for you to flee to Sakurano. With the Uga family there, the enemy would find it difficult to make a move."
Hearing that, I pictured the map in my mind.
From Nishihama City to Sakurano City, it's about thirty minutes on the private Sakurano Line... Of course, we can't use the train. But with our Domainers' stamina, we can walk there.
--Moreover, to reach Sakurano, we must cross the mountain pass on National Route 204.
--It's the perfect terrain for the enemy to lie in wait.
--Conversely, we could lure the enemy onto that mountain pass.
--In the middle of the night, traffic is light, so the chances of innocent bystanders getting caught in the crossfire are low.
--Shogoin's surveillance won't stop me from returning to Sakurano. In fact, they're probably hoping for it...
--I looked into Koharu's eyes.
".....When did you come up with this?"
"I've been thinking it over since the other day."
"You really are a strategist, aren't you?"
"Then, will you give your approval?"
"Yes. But the operation must be executed flawlessly."
I shoved my school bag into Koharu's arms.
"I'm heading to the pass alone right now. You stay in Nishihama."
"Young Master, you can't do that!"
"If I go alone, they'll definitely take the bait."
"To just take the plan and leave me behind...!"
Koharu stood there, clutching my bag, biting her lip. This was the first time I'd been this close to her. Was it just my imagination, or did her eyes seem to be trembling?
But I mustn't let myself be swayed.
Only my resolve... must never... ..
I told myself this and gently stepped away.
".....Just accept that he's a selfish young master."
"Young Master....."
Resolving to part ways, I turned my back on Koharu.
Potentia Activation Complete
▼Domain Factor, activation complete.
▼▼"Salos's Vigorous Limbs" automatically activated.
▼▼"Vine's Wise Eyes and Ears" activated automatically.
Enveloped in a spell's glow, I assumed a combat stance.

--This is enough.
--I can't keep relying on Koharu anymore.
--To return her feelings, this is the only way.....
I thought I'd found the answer. An answer that wouldn't hurt anyone and would protect everyone.
But Koharu's voice pierced my back.
"Young Master, I..."
I turned around without thinking. I caught a fleeting glimpse of Koharu's eyes. Their sparkle was somehow...
In that instant, we were surrounded by countless figures. Every single one of them wore the Shogoin family crest badge on their lapels. A woman with a bob cut stepped forward and bowed politely.
"I have come to report. I am Kiruka Sakakibara, Chief Domain Officer of the Shogoin family. From this moment on, the Shogoin family will take custody of Lord Ryoto Ugajin. We ask for your understanding."
"What did you say...?"
"Strict orders. You are to remain confined to your home until the end of tomorrow; you are strictly forbidden from leaving. You must endure this until the Shogoin family executes the culprit."
The moment I heard that, I lunged at Kirka.
"Have you found him?! Where is he?!"
"Rejected. I cannot disclose information regarding the culprit to you."
"Nonsense! I'm the one who was targeted!"
"Refusal. This is based on an agreement between the commanders of the Shogoin and Ugajin families; you have no right to refuse."
"Nonsense! There's no way my father would go along with such an arbitrary decision..."
"Addendum. The Elder of Miroku-ji has also given his consent. The Ugajin commander was extremely displeased, but the final decision stands."
Kiruka continued in a cold, emotionless voice.
"Conclusion. Please refrain from acting on your own. In this matter, there is no role for you to play."
Blatant condescension. But rather than resist, I stood there speechless, stunned.
−Am I not allowed to do anything?
−Not even to repay... or to respond.
My mind spun at the sudden declaration. But as if shielding me from the contempt, Koharu stepped in front of me.
"Wait! Please give Young Master a chance to fight!"
"Koharu..."
"I beg you! I won't cause any trouble for the people of Nishihama anymore! This time, I promise..."
Clinging to me, Koharu cried out for my freedom.
But in the middle of her plea... "whoosh!" Kirka vanished. The afterglow I caught for an instant was light blue. The color of the "Ryukoku" domain... Just as I thought that,

Kirka materialized right in front of Koharu. At the same time, she let out a scream that sounded like she was coughing up blood.

"Don't spout such nonsense, Kazuki!"

Shedding her inorganic form, Kirka transformed into a demonic visage.

"What I want to fight is your self-righteousness! Your desire to avenge the Sin-Bearers is also your self-righteousness! But I can't go along with such selfishness!"

"It doesn't matter who kills the Sin-Bearers! Don't you have any concern for the peace of this town?"

Koharu didn't flinch. I, too, was pierced by Kiruka's shout.

--It wasn't Shogoin who was fixated on the enemy.

--It was me.

As long as the Sin-Bearer is defeated and the peace of Nishihama is preserved, that's enough. Even if I'm the one being targeted, if someone more powerful accomplishes it, I should be satisfied as a Domain Master. Yet I...

Kirka slowly turned her gaze toward me. Her face had regained its impassive expression.

"The truth is, Your Highness has been defeated by a Sin-Bearer twice. You've had a three-year hiatus from actual combat... If we entrust the execution to a Domain Knight like that, the Shogoin family will have no face left in Nishihama."

"Sakakibara, I..."

"Conclusion. You have too many factors that lead to defeat. That is why we cannot place our trust in you."

The magical light faded from my body.

Exhausted, I leaned against the large tree behind me.

−This is the realistic assessment of me.

−Kindness like Morikita-san's is the exception.

−My father, and Senzaki too...

--Ash, and Mii...

--Everyone at school... and the old man at Miroku-ji...

--They won't even give me a chance to regain their trust.

--To me, who has lost their trust...

Suddenly, the feeling from this morning came flooding back.

I've been isolated not just from daily life, but from the world of Domain Masters as well. Chained to an invisible prison, deprived of any chance to atone, a being doomed to suffer eternal punishment... Yes, just like the immortal Titans of Greek mythology.

And in this world, there is no hero who can save me.

【Phase.5: Operation Commences at 18:00】

When I woke up, the sun was already high in the sky.

I'm used to sleeping on the sofa, but last night's conversation was intense. There was no way I could sleep soundly.

Saturday, 12:00 PM. I changed into my clothes and checked the Domain Factors within my body. They were overflowing, filling my limbs. At least my physical condition is excellent.
--But today, I don't need to use my magic.
--I don't need to go to training or school.
--I mustn't... do anything.
I stepped out onto the balcony and took a breath of fresh air. Tokyo Bay, visible from the 27th floor, was calm, and the city of Nishihama was shrouded in spring haze.
--Somewhere in this city...
--Today, it will all come to a head.
I can't help but think about it. I never imagined that "doing nothing" could be this painful...
Just then, I sensed Koharu's presence behind me.
"Good morning... Young Master."
Even Koharu, wearing her apron, seemed somewhat distant. I suppose that's to be expected. We haven't spoken to each other since that incident last night.
But I forced myself to start a conversation.
"I wonder what time they'll storm the hideout."
"Probably after sunset."
"Is this time going to drag on for another half-day...?"
I let out a complaint without meaning to.
But there was a look of worry on Koharu's face too. I'm not the only one suffering.
"Koharu... could you help me sort through my belongings today?"
I pointed from the balcony toward the living room. There, a mountain of my personal items still sat in their packing boxes. Koharu nodded slightly.
"Understood. It looks like it'll take until evening."
"Yeah. If I immerse myself in the work, I won't have to think about anything else."
"Young Master, I..."
"Let's leave it for today, okay?"
"..... Yes....."
"Besides, I want to eat."
"I'll join you."
"Huh? You haven't eaten yet?"
"I was waiting for you, Young Master."
"Such consideration..."
"A servant never touches her food before the Young Master."
Koharu bowed slightly and returned to the kitchen.
I was starting to get used to her being by my side. Yet, the fact that I still hadn't acknowledged her as my servant felt somehow strange.
In the end, this is probably just my own self-righteousness.

***

"It's another day off today, Ugajin and Matsushita."

"......Yeah."
At Elhiko's words, Yuri slumped her shoulders.
Saturday classes had ended before noon, but most of the students in Class 1-A were still there. Everyone was
eating their boxed lunches in the classroom; apparently, they were heading to Gakuto-tai training in the afternoon.
But Yuri, with no such plans of her own, sipped her strawberry milk through a straw.
"I wonder if Ryo and Koharu are okay... With Shogoin-kun watching over them, they probably can't even go out into town... It must be stressful for a Domain Master not to be able to fight."
"You're relieving that stress in bed, aren't you?"
"Guh, guh, guh-uuuuuuuuuuuuuuu..."
The sound of her sipping strawberry milk turned into a loud slurping.
"That's a lie, a lie. There's absolutely no way Ryo and Koharu would end up in that kind of relationship. That's right, Shogoin-kun must have misheard. After all, Ryo said the Shogoin family's Domain Masters are low-quality, and the conversation probably got distorted like a game of telephone. That's right, that's right—calm down, Yuri, calm down!"
"Self-hypnosis is pathetic, Miroku-ji-san."
Elhiko saw right through her, and Yuri was crushed.
Then, a few girls gathered around Yuri.
"But Miroku-ji-san, you really are all about Uga-kami-kun, aren't you?"
"The "childhood friends turned lovers' scenario?"
"Did you make a promise like, "I'll marry you' when you were kids?"
Yuri then quickly adjusted her bangs.
"W-well, we didn't actually make a promise, but he's just someone I can't stop thinking about. We used to train together back in the day, and whenever Ryo-chan got hurt, he'd act all cute and say, "Yuri-chan, heal me!'... And when I'd heal him, he'd smile and say, "Thanks! I love you, Yuri-chan!'..."
At that moment, the classroom erupted in laughter.
"No way! That Ugajin smiling?"
"I don't believe it! I've never seen him smile."
"I mean, he's always 100% killing intent."
"He's a good guy, but his face is scary."
"He always looks like he's angry, doesn't he?"
But Yuri clenched her fists.
"That's not it! Ryo-chan is actually a kind person, I swear... ...Well, I haven't seen him smile once since we met again, but..."
"Miroku-ji, do you know why?"
"Probably because of the incident three years ago... I don't know the details, but maybe it's because Ryo-chan's first Kasizuki passed away."
As Yuri spoke, the laughter died down.
"Huh?"

"I want Ryo-chan to smile like he used to. But he's been rejected by the school too... I don't know how to encourage him."
Just then, the quick-witted Manami Hoshimura clapped her hands.
"Then why don't we all send Ugajin a message?"
"To tell him that Class 1-A is on his side. Ask him if there's anything we can do... Let's start with that."
So, the members of Class 1-A gathered together.
"That's a good idea."
"Really? Uganami will probably be too shy to respond."
"Even so, it'll show we care."
"If things stay like this, Uganami might end up hating school."
"Maybe Uganami will reply with a smiley face if it's an email?"
"Then the first person to get a smiley face wins. What's the prize?"
"I'm gonna send one to Matsushita-san too."
"Wait a minute. I don't know either of their email addresses."
"Me neither." "Me too." "Me too."
"Mirokuji-san, do you know them?"
Yuri shook her head.
"Sorry. I haven't asked yet either... Oh, but since Mii-san is the class representative, she probably...'
"Huh? Mii-san isn't here."
"That guy went home already!"
"Useless! For a class representative!"
"Alright, let's ask the upperclassmen. If it's the Gakuto Squad that Ugajin joined for his trial enrollment, they might have his email address!"
"That's it! Let's split up and start asking around!"
Class 1-A bolted out of the classroom like a pack of rabbits. The time is currently 1:○○ p.m.....

***

National Route 23, heading inland from the center of Nishihama. Turning off that main road onto a side street, there is a cluster of massive warehouses nestled among the trees. Shogoin Moving Center, Sixth Branch...
But inside the warehouse, a massive tactical table had been set up, and countless Domain Soldiers were bustling about. Floating on the table—whose surface had been transformed into a 3D display—was a map of Nishihama's city streets. The glowing dots moving across the map represented the Domain Soldiers on the ground, their colors matching their respective domains. And those dots were encircling a section of Nishihama's outskirts from a distance.
"This is the Sin-Bearers' hideout. The former site of the Nishihama City Environmental Services Bureau's Sixth Incineration Center."
Ash Shogoin informed the Domain Masters.

"It's a Nishihama City facility slated for demolition. It's been deserted lately, and it seems the Sin-Bearers slipped in while no one was looking. The search team has already confirmed eighteen people coming and going."

Walking slowly around the table, Ash stroked his sharp chin.

"There is likely one Sin-Bearer acting as the ringleader... the rest are probably his subordinates, the Wounded. But combatants granted only illusory power are hardly worth fearing. Currently, twelve have been confirmed inside the target area... the remaining six have split into two groups and are moving through Nishihama City. Another team is tracking them."

Ash glanced at his wristwatch.

"Barring any complications, the operation will commence at 1800 hours... In five hours, we will simultaneously eliminate the Sin-Bearers both inside and outside the hideout."

The Shogoin family's "Divine Mind" Domain Masters were monitoring the targets using observation techniques and communicating with the Domain Masters on the ground via remote thought transmission. This was the Shogoin family's operational management system, which directly linked the Domain Masters.

"Report from Surveillance Team 1: No changes to the target of the raid."

"Surveillance Team 2: Target Group Alpha is heading north from the Nishihama 7th Street intersection."

"Surveillance Team 3: Nishihama Interchange exit—we'll begin the staged traffic control in 30 minutes."

"How did you find out about the hideout?"

A timid-looking boy approached Ash as he listened to the situation report.

"Is that a mystery to you, Cadet Kataoka?"

Ash looked down at the map and smiled.

"Both the Sin-Bearers and the Scarred have sacrificed all their internal Domain Factors to gain Void Power. In other words, I simply scanned every single person in Nishihama City and identified those who possess absolutely no Domain Factors."

"You say "every single person'... but Nishihama City has a population of over 500,000."

Mii's face twisted in disbelief.

"And if we include commuters and students from outside the city, as well as the surrounding towns and villages, the number of people to scan would double. Surely you didn't..."

"Ah, I've investigated them all. In just two or three days. It's a meticulous, manpower-intensive strategy unique to our Shogoin family, which boasts a large number of Domain Masters."

Ash continued, almost as if singing.

"This is why I studied "Guardian' and "Divine Wisdom.' If we master wide-area scanning, we can completely maintain peace within our jurisdiction."

"So that means we can obtain all kinds of personal information without the consent of ordinary citizens..."

"Exactly. If we wish, we can obtain information on the citizens of Nishihama—from their DNA to their sexual preferences. Not only that, but if we combine it with the mind-

reading techniques of "Soul,' we could even read the thoughts flying through the streets. Who hates whom, and what delusions people indulge in..."
"Doesn't that violate the Domain Charter?"
"The Total Mobilization Act takes precedence over any human rights protection law."
Ash raised his cup to Mii, who had turned pale.
"Cast aside such petty hypocrisy, Cadet Kataoka. This is the new form of the War of the Otherworlds. Unless we abandon the individual and commit fully to organizational warfare, humanity will be defeated by the Heterophases."
"Yes..."
"The real issue is why the Sin-Bearers targeted Ryoto... What on earth do those bastards know..."
Mii silently stared at Ash as he groaned. It is currently 1:20 p.m.....

***

"Speaking of which, Young Master..... you have quite a lot of books, don't you?"
Koharu remarked as she opened a cardboard box. I was amazed at myself, too.
"Well, yeah. I've accumulated quite a few. For the past three years, ordering books to read was pretty much my only form of entertainment."
"History, science, literature... quite a variety."
"I'm pretty eclectic when it comes to books... Oh, just put them on the shelves wherever you like. I'll organize them later when I have some free time."
Afternoon sunlight streamed into my apartment. But as Koharu and I quietly sorted through the books together, my restlessness began to fade.
Eventually, Koharu picked up a book.
"I've read this one, too."
The title of the book was "How Helen Keller Was Educated".
Helen Keller was a "spiritual being" born at the end of the 19th century who lost her sight and ability to speak at a young age.
But the author of this book was Anne Sullivan—the tutor who taught Helen her skills.
Ms. Sullivan, who communicated with Helen—who could barely speak—and taught her the ways, is also known as "The Miracle Worker."
Koharu stared intently at the book.
"This woman is my ideal. She guided the once-spoiled Helen to become a fine spiritual practitioner... I, too, wish to be like her."
"I don't think Miss Sullivan would push Helen off the twenty-seventh floor."
"No. If Miss Sullivan's student were you, she probably would... But you, why this book?"
".....Because someone told me to read it."
"Who was that?"
"..... ...A single man from Scotland."
It surprised even me. But I still haven't forgotten the book he recommended. Suppressing any further reminiscence, I scratched my head.
"I've already forgotten what kind of guy he was. It's been quite a while since I've seen him."

"I see... is that so?"
"Ah, put that book over here."
"..... "Yes, Young Master."
I glanced at my watch as I moved my hands. It was currently 3:20 p.m.

***

"The Sun Sets Over Distant Mountains" played over the public address system in Nishihama City. Listening to the song that served as the hourly chime, Reira Izanagi handed me the class roster.
"Here you go, Mirokuji-san. Uga-kami-kun and Matsushita-san's email addresses are listed here. This roster isn't subject to the Personal Information Protection Act."
"Ah, thank you, Sensei... After all, no one knows Ryo-chan and the others' contact info..."
Yuri, who had been running around the school for hours, was panting heavily. Still, she quickly typed the information into her phone and sent it.
Reira Izanagi watched the scene from her seat in the faculty room.
"Are you sending this to the whole class?"
"Ah, yes. And to quite a few upperclassmen, too."
"The ones who recruited Ugan-kun into the Gakuto Squad, right?"
"That's right. Actually, it seems everyone was dissatisfied with the First District's handling of the situation... When I mentioned sending Ryo-chan a message of support, more people started joining in."
"That kind of kindness might actually be a burden for Uga-kun."
Leila rested her finger on her pointed chin.
"He's afraid of dragging you all into this. That's why he complied with the First Jurisdiction's punishment. He went out of his way to keep his distance, so if you get too close, he's the one who'll be in trouble."
"I know. That's why I'm holding back for now and just letting him know how I feel. But really..."
"Even knowing you'll get dragged into it, you still want to help Uga-kun?"
"Not everyone, but... most of Class 1-A feels that way."
That was her conviction as a "Soul" Domain Master. There was no deception in the fervor she'd felt in the classroom.
Leila fell silent for a moment... then suddenly opened her desk drawer. She pulled out a slender liquor bottle. The label featured a stag's antler. She poured the amber liquid steadily into a mug.
"Eh..."
"T-Teacher, that's not... real..."
"The pinnacle of bourbon, George T. Stagg. It was imported before the Eastern U.S. was overrun." "E-even for you, Professor, drinking on campus is..."
"Don't be so uptight. I'm in the mood to toast you all right now."
Paying no heed to Yuri's fluster, Leila downed it in one gulp and exhaled a hot breath.
"......I've found a good goal."

"By the time you graduate, I'll make Class 1-A the strongest in the school. I'll turn every one of you into Domain Masters who can hold their own against Uga-kami."

"......Teacher."

"If you want to be with him, you have no choice but to get stronger..... Right now, the only ones qualified to do that are Matsushita and you, Miroku-ji."

"..... .....Yes."

"Go on, go to Ugajin. After all, you're one of those who isn't afraid of getting caught in the crossfire, aren't you?"

Yuri nodded firmly.

"I'm not afraid. Absolutely not."
Saying only that, she bowed and turned to leave.
But just then, the staff room door suddenly swung open.
"There's another one here—an ally of Ugajin!"
"Ah, you scared me! Don't startle me like that, Elhiko-kun!"
Ignoring Yuri's cry, Elhiko barged into the staff room.
"I heard you, Miroku-ji-san. You're going to Ugajin's house, right? Take me with you."
"No way, were you eavesdropping?"
"I can't just sit around waiting for emails. Besides, it's only natural to worry about a teammate who's taking a break."
"Huh? You still plan to team up with Ryo-chan and the Gakuto Squad?"
"More like, as far as I'm concerned, we're already a team. Ugajin and I are one and the same—the Gakuto Squad."
"Stop it, that sounds kinda creepy..."
But Elhiko suddenly tilted his head.
"Come to think of it, Morikita-san is taking a break too... I heard her shop got wrecked."
"Oh... right."
Then Elhiko suddenly pulled Yuri's arm toward him.
"Alright, before we go to Ugajin's place, let's pay Morikita-san a home visit!"
"Why does it have to be like that?! I was going to go first..."
"Just come on, let's go!"
"Elhiko, aren't you just worried about Saori? Hey, wait a minute! If we're holding hands, people will get the wrong idea!!"
Yuri screamed as she was forcibly dragged out of the faculty room.
The only one left behind was Reira Izanagi, smiling aloofly. The time is currently 5:15 p.m.....

***

"Phew, finally got that sorted."
I sank my exhausted body onto the sofa.
All the luggage in the living room had been put away, and the room now had a clear view. Outside, it was already dusk.
--That Ash guy...
--I wonder if he's started by now.
Just as I thought that, Koharu handed me a cup of coffee.
"Young Master, here you go."
"Ah... uh."
"I'll be making dinner now. I can't go out to buy groceries, so it'll just be leftovers—is that okay?"
"Uh, yeah."
Koharu put on her apron and went into the open kitchen. She must be just as tired as I am, yet she's already preparing dinner... Is that really okay?
"Eh..."

--No way, I knew it.
--I can't just keep taking advantage of Koharu's kindness like this.
--At this rate, I really am just a spoiled rich kid.
A sudden wave of self-loathing washed over me. I stood up from the sofa and went into the kitchen.
"Koharu, you rest. I'll make dinner."
"You're still recovering, after all. Just sit on the sofa and have some tea."
But Koharu stood her ground in the kitchen.
"No, I'll cook. Resting is out of the question."
"It's okay once in a while, isn't it?"
"I appreciate your kindness, but I cannot accept it. Please, don't spoil me."
"I'm the one being spoiled here."
Come to think of it, it's rare to find someone so faithful to their duties as a servant. It's as if she's memorized the entire "Servant's Manual" (though no such thing actually exists) and is putting every word into practice.
And as for me... I'm certainly not the heir everyone's pinning their hopes on. I caused trouble in the past, and even now, I'm still resented. It suddenly struck me as strange that Koharu would devote herself to someone like me.
"Hey, Koharu... why are you so dedicated? You're wasting your time on me."
"I am merely fulfilling my duties as a retainer."
"Even so... is there some other reason?"
It was a casual question. But Koharu's reply was delayed just a little... for an instant, too brief to be noticed.
"...No, I am merely following the Commander's orders and thinking of you, Young Master."
I sensed a subtle tremor in Koharu's voice. At the same time, I recalled her words from last night.
"Please don't underestimate me. We've been together for so long now. I can see through that much."
Koharu has her eyes cast down. The direct gaze she usually directs at me is gone. In other words...
--I've been with Koharu the whole time, too.
--I can see right through that.
Convinced, I confronted Koharu.
"Koharu... you really are up to something..."
But just then... the intercom rang unexpectedly.
"Hello there, Young Master, are you there?"
"W-who is it? Who's calling so casually at a time like this?"
My interrogation interrupted, I glared at the wall. The LCD monitor showed the apartment building's entrance. But I didn't recognize the visitors on the screen.
".....Who is it?"
On the screen were three children: a boy and a girl who looked like elementary school students, and a girl in a kindergarten uniform. The two older ones were carrying

large backpacks on their backs and bags in both hands. Still burdened with their heavy luggage, they approached the screen.
"Hey, Yota-nii, are you sure this is the right room?"
"It's fine. I heard it's Room 277."
"Oh, I just heard a man's voice."
"Alright... Young Master, let us in! Young Master, come on!"
Just then, several adults rushed up from behind. They wore Shogoin family badges on their collars. Apparently, they were my guards.
"What business do you have in that room?"
"Shut up. We're here to see Young Master Uga-jin."
"Yota-nii, these people are from the Shogoin family."
"What did you say?! Those obnoxious Shogoins?!"
"Shh, don't say what you really think."
"Come over here for a moment, you lot."
"Shut up, let go of me! Young Master, help me! Young Master!"
My mouth hung open at the commotion on the screen.
"What the hell is wrong with these guys..."
Then, behind me, Koharu bowed.
"I'm sorry, Young Master. Could you please let those children through?"
"Do you know them, Koharu?"
"Yes... they are my younger brother and sister."

***

Yuri took a seat at the counter of "Lapis Lazuli."
"I'm so glad, Morikita-san. It looks like the shop's all fixed up."
Even though it was Saturday, there were no other customers inside. Still, Morikita Mikage was smiling cheerfully.
"Thank you, Mirokuji-san. Uga-kun and Matsushita-san helped me out yesterday, too."
"Huh! Those two came by?!"
"Yeah. They even had dinner here..."
"How were they? Were they closer than before? Were they gazing into each other's eyes while sharing a single cream soda with two straws?"
"That's a couple from the last century, isn't it?"
As he spoke, Elhiko also took a seat at the counter. Naturally, Saori was right across from him, washing dishes.
"Oh, hello, Yano-kun."
"Y-you remembered my name?"
"Of course. Coke again today?"
"You even remember what I ordered last time! I see... so my presence really made an impact on you, Saori. Or rather, that's love at first sight. Heh heh heh... Just as I expected! To win over a mature woman in one fell swoop."
Yuri narrowed her eyes in disbelief.

"Who belongs to whom... Anyway, Morikita-san, there weren't many people in the shopping district, were there?"
"Yeah... It's partly because of the Kyoko-tai commotion, but... there's a rumor that the Shogoin family is making a move." "So, the execution of the Penitents..."
"I think so... Is that the opponent Uga-kami-kun fought?"
"Apparently. And it seems neither Ryo-chan nor Koharu-chan can get involved in that execution." "No way..."
"That's why they've been banned from coming to school since yesterday... Wait, didn't you hear this from him directly?"
".....Yeah....."
Misora was speechless and stopped washing the dishes. Her gaze was confused. The fingers gripping the dishcloth were trembling slightly.
Yuri hurriedly spoke up.
"Don't worry. Once the case is solved, even Ryo-chan will..."
Just then, the bell at the entrance jingled. Saori immediately came out from behind the counter to greet the customer.
"Welcome. Are you here alone?"
The man who entered looked like an ordinary office worker on his way home from work... or so it seemed. But there was a hint of mockery in his voice.
".....I'm alone. But I'd like to have this place all to myself for a while."
"Huh?"
"And... your heart, too."
Suspicious, Yuri turned around. In that instant, the "Soul" Domain Master realized the man's true identity.
"Saori, that guy is...!"
But before Yuri's warning could reach him...
9846394629646428634927864297696418461287963421789369286421879346879 6.....
Current time: 5:55 PM.

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"Target Group Alpha has entered the parking lot next to Nishihama North Junior High School. Ready to attack."
"Target Group Bravo is moving through the Municipal First Cemetery. Ready to attack."
"Twelve targets remain inside the objective area. All assault teams, ready to attack."
Upon receiving the report, Ash Shogoin stroked his chin.
"Two minutes until the start of the operation... Well then, let's begin, Cadet Kataoka. Learn the Shogoin family's way of war thoroughly."
But Mii trembled with anxiety.
"But what exactly were those two groups doing? They left their hideout, didn't make any notable moves, and just seemed to be circling the city."
"I don't know. Maybe they were looking for Ryoto, or doing some kind of reconnaissance... Well, we'll find out once we execute them. We can read their memories even from their corpses."

After staring at his wristwatch for a moment, Ash spoke into his throat microphone.
"One minute to go. As planned, commence the execution operation."
The light dot on the map display moved toward the site of the former Sixth Incineration Center. As the encirclement tightened, Mii's throat made a gulping sound.
"Young Master, please look at this!"
But just then, a Domainist ran up to Ash, holding a bundle of papers.
"What is it now?"
"I've finally managed to identify every single target within the assault zone."
Identification... that is, using detailed scanning techniques to extract the Sinner's DNA, cross-referencing it with the global Sinner and Wound-Bearer database, and determining exactly who they are and where they're from. If they have a criminal history, it's also possible to understand what kind of Void Power they use and which Sin Clan they belong to.
But Ash grimaced in dissatisfaction.
"That's too slow. Why did it take so long?"
"That is....."
"Send this to the assault team immediately. Otherwise....."
"No, wait—they're....."
Mii's scream cut through the Domain Master's voice.
"Captain Shogoin, look at the map.....!"
At her call, Ash looked down at the map display. Stunned. A scream caught in his throat.
The next moment, the scene...
00947216434679462176437285642345044123842378547213812384602754610235....
Current time: 17:59:50, 51, 52, 53... 54...

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Sender: God of the Underworld. Subject: Operation Commence.
"Good work. It is now 18:00. Please proceed as planned. If anything comes up, I'll be there to help."
Sender: Rusted Nail. Subject: Re: Operation Commence.
"I'm humbled by your concern (bows deeply with an emoji). I've already reserved the entire shop. I just sent an email to Ryoto Uga-no-Kami as well. This should put his mind at ease."

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"I'm Yota Matsushita, eight years old. Nice to meet you."
"I'm Kaede Matsushita, six years old. Nice to meet you, Young Master."

The two older children placed their hands on the living room floor and bowed properly. The little girl in her kindergarten uniform imitated them and bowed as well.
"(Bow)"
"This is my youngest sister, Yukimi, three years old. She's a bit of a quiet one..."
After Koharu introduced them, I took another look at the three children.
Yota had a competitive look on his face. Kaede had a sharp, clever air about her. However, neither of them had blonde hair.
Only Yukimi had chestnut-colored hair, and she looked most like Koharu.
"Four siblings? That's rare. Did you come from Sakurano?"
"Yes. To deliver some things to Big Sis."
Yota pointed to his backpack and bag.
"Mom told us. She said Big Sis became the Young Master's attendant, so she won't be coming home for a while."
"That's why I brought a change of clothes and stuff."
Kaede also tapped her backpack a couple of times.
"Koharu-neesan, your clothes are in this one. And your training gear is in that one."
"Thanks, Kaede."
"But wow, Young Master's room is so big. I want to live in a room like this too."
I furrowed my brow at Kaede's spoiled tone.
"Hold on a sec. Sorry, but I still..."
Suddenly, Yukimi stood up. She toddled over and clung to my arm.
""Squeeze""
"W-what the hell, hey..."
Even when I asked, Yukimi didn't answer. Then Kaede gave a little smile.
"Hehehe... Yukimi's just thanking you, Young Master."
"(Nod, nod)"
"What does that mean?"
"Well, Young Master..." "Gah!"
Koharu covered Kaede's mouth with her hand before she could finish.
"Kaede, there's no need to say anything unnecessary to the Young Master. Now, put your things down and go home."
"B-but—"
"Just go home. This is the Young Master's training ground. It's no place for children to linger."
Koharu's voice sounded even stricter than when she spoke to me. It really did seem like there was something going on...
"Wait a minute, Koharu. That's a bit much, isn't it?"
"Young Master..."
"Yota!"

"These kids came all the way from Sakurano by train just for you. Telling them to go home right after they're done with their business is a bit cold, don't you think?"
At that, Kaede smiled happily.
"Wow, Young Master is so kind!"
"Besides, I don't really get what this girl is doing."
I pointed at Yukimi, who was clinging to me.
"What do you mean by "thanks'? Did I do anything for your family?"
"You bestowed upon us the honor of being chosen as your attendants. That alone is more than enough."
Then, Yota leaned forward while still seated.
"Young Master, let me speak!"
Koharu's voice grew louder. Still, Yota brushed aside his sister's attempts to stop him.
"Thanks to you, Young Master, Yukimi was able to get into kindergarten."
"Thanks to me? No, this is the first time I've met Yukimi, and I don't remember doing anything for her."
"That's true, but... because Young Master chose my sister to be your attendant, our family was saved, and Yukimi was able to get into kindergarten."
"I don't get it at all."
"So, um... thanks to my sister becoming your attendant, our stipend from the domain increased. We didn't have the money to send Yukimi to kindergarten..."
I turned my gaze toward Koharu. But with her face down, I couldn't see her expression.
"Is that true, Koharu?"
“.....”
"It's true, Young Master."
Kaede answered in her place.
"We do receive an allowance from the domain, but honestly, it's tough to send four siblings to school. That's why Koharu-nee didn't go on the school trip in middle school—she used that money to pay for our school lunches instead."
I couldn't help but be impressed by her grasp of the situation, which didn't seem like that of a six-year-old.
".....Are you guys living off Koharu's allowance alone? What about your parents?"
"Dad passed away. He was a Domain Master, but he died fighting an Anomaly....."
"What about your mom?"
"She's doing fine. But she's so busy with housework that she can't go out to work."
Yota stated this calmly. It's a rare situation these days, but my family is partly to blame. The stipend provided by the Uga-jin family is by no means generous.
I stared at Yukimi, who was clinging to me.
"Yukimi... did you want to go to kindergarten?"
When I asked, my little sister shook her head. But Yota spoke up right away.
"That's not it, Young Master. Yukimi's just putting on a brave face. Neither Kaede nor I—and of course, not even Big Sis—went to kindergarten."
Kaede nodded vigorously.
"But the kindergarten is near our house, and every time we passed by, Yuki would look at the kids inside. She looked so envious..."

"I see..."
"She even memorized the nursery rhymes and the dance moves... and would play by herself in the garden. Right, Yuki?"
Even so, Yuki didn't answer. She just squeezed my arm tightly. I stroked her hair and called out to my silent older sister.
"Koharu..."
"Young Master, I..."
"I'm hungry."
I turned my gaze toward the bewildered Koharu.
"Since these kids came all this way, shall we go out to eat somewhere?"
"That won't do. Going out is forbidden."
"Yeah... until just a moment ago."
I opened my phone and reread the email that had just arrived. The sender was Ash Shogoin. The arrogant message appeared on the screen.
"Execution completed without incident. I've had the guards withdrawn. You're free to go out now.'
I showed it to Koharu to convince her. Her expression was a mix of relief and loneliness... I'm probably wearing the same look myself.
It's all over now.
−Everything happened without me even knowing...
But to blow off some steam, I picked Yukimi up.
"Alright, let's go to "Lapis Lazuli.' Everyone, come with us."
But Yota and Kaede's faces stiffened.
"N-no way, we can't do that!"
"We only have enough money for the train ride home!"
"Listen. Who said we'd split the bill? I'll cover the meal. Don't worry—you can order whatever you want."
When I said that, Kaede jumped into Yota's arms as he threw up a fist pump.
"Yay, we did it! It's been ages since we ate out!"
"A-are you sure it's okay, Young Master?"
Seeing that, Koharu looked like she wanted to say something, but...
"Lapis Lazuli" was deserted, even though it was Saturday night. We were the only customers... It must be because of the Kyoko-tai commotion.
But Saori served us our food with a cheerful smile.
"Here you go. I hope you like it."
"Let's dig in!"
With gusto, Yota dug into his Japanese-style hamburger steak, while Kaede started on her tomato risotto. Yukimi, sitting in a high chair, was of course having the kids' meal.
"Look, you've got ketchup on your mouth, Yukimi."
While I ate my pepperoncini pasta, I wiped the ketchup from the corner of Yukimi's mouth.
"(Gulp..... Munch, munch.)"
Yukimi was quiet but strangely cute, and Saori couldn't help but smile at her.

"Hehe, she's eating so earnestly. But I never knew Koharu had a little brother and sister like this..." "......Yes."
Koharu had been quiet ever since we sat down. She hadn't even touched the omelet rice she'd ordered.
But I deliberately didn't say anything. I had a feeling that if I spoke up, things would get serious, and I didn't want to ruin this moment.
Trying to change the subject, I turned my gaze toward Saori.
"Um, is Morikita-san...?"
"Yeah, she went out to run some errands."
Saori immediately returned to the counter. But to me, it looked like she had suddenly turned pale. Even her profile as she washed the dishes looked strangely...
I glanced at my watch. It was currently 6:30 p.m.
"Koharu, once we're done eating, take these guys back to Sakurano. You can go straight home to your parents' place tonight, too."
"But then, Young Master's security..."
"The case is over, Koharu."
[..... ...]
"There weren't any Shogoin family guards watching us when we left the apartment earlier, were there? I'm safe now. One night won't be a problem."
"But..."
"Besides... I want to be alone, too."
Letting my true feelings slip made me feel a little lighter. I stopped washing the dishes.
"I'll have a cup of coffee here tonight, then head back to my room. Can't you give me that much time?"
Koharu was silent for a moment, then finally nodded. Relieved, I drained my glass of water.
But tonight, there was no trace of Koharu's usual direct gaze.

***

Last Nail To: El Diablo Kenmei
From: Rusted Nail. To: God of the Underworld. Subject: Operation Commence.
"That saved me some trouble. I never expected them to come to the shop on their own. And it looks like she's breaking up with Kashizuki. This will make my work go much smoother (lol)."

"""

7:10 PM. It was already completely dark outside. I stepped out of "Lapis Lazuli" to see Koharu and the others off.
The street in front of the station was strangely quiet, with hardly anyone around. Yota and the other two had stepped out onto the street and were frolicking around, having a carefree time.
Then Koharu looked nervous.

"Thank you so much for today, Young Master. Even for my younger brothers' sake..."
"It's fine. They're cute, and... maybe it's because I'm an only child. Seeing kids like that makes me want a little brother or sister."
“.....”
"Take good care of them. See ya."
"Um... Young Master!"
Koharu looked at me with desperate eyes. Her lips seemed to be trembling slightly.
"I would never..."
"I get it. It's not for the money, is it?"
I said this while watching Yota and the others.
"You're not clinging to Kashizuki just for the allowance. I can tell that much."
"Young Master..."
"Well, that makes sense. The allowance we give is nothing to write home about. If you were after money, you'd find a better-paying job. Besides..."
−You wouldn't risk your life for money.
Especially for someone like me...
That look of disgust crept back onto her face. An irritation I just couldn't shake. Just as I was feeling that desperate, frantic anxiety, Yukimi came trotting over.
"What's wrong, Yukimi?"
"(Grin)"
"?"
"(Grin)"
Yukimi said nothing, just pulling her cheeks out to the sides. She looked up at me, repeating the motion over and over...
".....Are you trying to tell me to smile?"
"(Nod, nod)"
"O-okay, then, like this? (I think this is a smile, at least to me)"
"(Wiggle, wiggle)"
"Ugh..... How about this? (I think this is my best smile.)"
"(wiggle, wiggle)"
Rejected by Yukimi, I tried stroking my own face. Sure enough, my facial muscles were completely stiff. To be unable to smile even in front of such a small, cute girl.....
Just then, Koharu pulled Yukimi's hand toward her.
"Young Master..."
"Eh..."
"Yukimi. You mustn't trouble Young Master any further."
"I'm sorry. I couldn't fulfill your request, Yukimi... but I really am bad at smiling."
"But next time we meet, I'll show you a proper smile. I promise. Let's make a pinky promise."
I linked my pinky with Yukimi's and we crossed our fingers. My first promise with those innocent eyes... Just then, Koharu suddenly spoke up.
"Young Master... I'm sure you'll keep that promise."
"No, it's nothing... Good night, Young Master."

As if trying to brush it off, Koharu bowed. But her wish had lodged itself in my heart.
"Koharu, what you just said was..."
But Koharu had already vanished across the street. Her long golden hair swayed as she walked, holding her younger siblings' hands.
Only now did that color seem familiar to me.

***

From: Rusted Nail. To: God of the Underworld. Subject: Operation: Two.
"Well then, let's begin."

***

"Saori-san...?"
I went back inside the shop and was surprised.
Saori-san was lowering the shutters on the window of "Lapis Lazuli." She'd also turned off half the shop's lights.
"Are you closing up?"
"Yeah. I'm not really in the mood to work tonight. I'm feeling a little..."
"Are you okay?"
"I'm just a little tired. Oh, I already made your coffee, Ryoto-kun."
On the table sat a steaming cup of Mandheling. I sat down and took a sip of my after-dinner coffee. For some reason, it tasted bitterer than last time...
"I think I'll head home. I don't want to be a bother by staying here too long."
"You don't have to worry about that. Misora's out buying medicine right now..."
Just as I was about to speak... Saori disappeared from my view. A moment later, I heard the sound of a plate shattering. Saori was crouched down behind the counter.
"Sa-Saori!"
I rushed over in a panic. Saori's face was pale as a sheet. Cold sweat covered her body. I found a clean towel, dampened it with water, and wiped her forehead.
"Saori, have you been feeling unwell this whole time...?"
"...But... it's just anemia..."
"You can't push yourself like this. You must be overworked. With everything that's happened, you still went out of your way to cook for us..."
I stared at Saori, who was still lying on the floor. She looked so frail, as if she might break at any moment.
She seemed so strong on the outside...
But Saori must have been suffering too.
I imagine running a shop is incredibly hard work. On top of that, the whole Kyoko incident must have piled on the emotional strain. I feel partly responsible for that too...
But I couldn't just leave Saori lying on the floor forever. I reached out to help her up.
"Saori, I'm going to carry you to the bedroom. You won't be able to rest here."
".....Yeah, I guess so....."

"You can't stand up, can you? Then I'll carry you."
"Ryoto-kun....."
But just as I wrapped my arms around Saori's shoulders and reached for her legs•••••• A slender finger brushed against my cheek.
"You're so gentle, Ryoto-kun."
"Eh....."
Suddenly, Saori-san pulled me close. Our faces drew near. Her sweet breath... and then my lips were sealed by a soft touch.

“.....”

"......Mmm..."
".....
−I'm kissing her.
−Saori, right now.
My entire consciousness has been stolen by Saori. A tongue slipped into my mouth. It sought me out, tasting of the bitterness of coffee.
Saori pressed her body against mine as if in a hurry. Her body heat feels unnaturally intense. Finally pulling away, Saori smiled.
".....Lie down here, Ryo-kun."
A gentle command. But no matter how hard I strained my eyes, I could see nothing but Saori. In fact, I didn't even have the strength to sit up.
--Why.....
My body won't move.....
Lying in the darkness, my body was burning up like I had a fever. Saori pressed herself against me.
".....Let's do it one more time."
"....."
"..... This time, let's go even further....."
"....."
".....Lick....."
"....."
".....Ah....."
"....."
".....Chu....."
A long, sweet moment stretched on. Honestly, I wanted this to go on forever. But the sliver of reason I had left sensed something sinister.
−Saori, why did you suddenly...
And why is my body...
Overcome by fever, I felt myself falling somewhere.
Into a deep, deep darkness. Into a dark, dark hole.
Buried in the sludge pooling at the bottom, I couldn't breathe. No. I can't breathe. Even if I try to struggle, my body won't move.
Still, I reach out. Someone, please...
"Young Master!"
Suddenly, I heard Koharu's voice.
It sounded distant... as if she were shouting from beyond a high wall.
"Young Master, please answer me! Young Master!"
Hearing that voice, I recalled Koharu's dignified face. My reason returned. It felt as though the heat enveloping my body had cooled instantly.
--What am I doing...
--I can't be doing this with Saori...
But just as I tried to sit up, Saori wrapped her arms around me.
"What's wrong, Ryoto-kun?"
"J-just now, I heard Koharu's voice..."

"No, I won't let you go!"
Saori clung to me as if possessed.
"Ryoto-kun is mine! Please, don't go! Come on, Ryoto-kun! Ryoto-kun!"
Her hair was disheveled, and she looked completely out of her mind. But Koharu's voice was getting closer, too.
"Young Master! Keep your wits about you! Young Master!"
Then, the darkness was struck by a violent impact and shook violently. A screeching, grinding sound. I could feel the sensation of something breaking.
Soon, a red light pierced the darkness. Cutting through the wall of darkness, a blonde girl appeared. With fighting spirit in her eyes and resolve on her lips, she stood alone. Seeing her radiate the red magical light of "Penance" from her entire body, I forced out a cry.
"Koharu!"
The blonde girl charged straight toward me. A black magical light shone from her arm. Koharu slammed her raised fist into Saori's back.
"Pardon me!"
"Aah!"
Saori twitched and convulsed beneath me. As Koharu's spell reached me as well, the physical bonds binding me were broken.
"Ugh...!"
I broke out in a cold sweat and snapped back to my senses. What Koharu had unleashed was a Level 2 "Annihilation" Contact Void-Expulsion Technique—a spell designed to expel magical power from the human body. The fact that I'd awakened because of its effect meant... Beres's Merciful Fist Strike"..... An anomaly employed by Beres, the Mental Realm Master known as the "Mad King"...
"Saori-san!"
I caught the unconscious Saori-san in my arms and spotted a distorted emblem on her white neck. The mark of a Soul-Sucker... Burned by Koharu's spell, it sizzled and charred, eventually fading away. It was proof that her mind had been manipulated by the Penitent.
Koharu also let out a sigh of relief.
"It's an infectious type of Void Power. I suspect it was a plot to capture Young Master using Saori-sama as a host."
"You saved me again... but weren't you supposed to have gone back to Sakurano?"
"I came back because I was worried about Young Master. I put my younger brothers on the train and contacted Mother to have her come pick me up at Sakurano Station..."
Koharu clenched her fists tightly.
"But when I came to Mr. Morikita's shop, I sensed an unusual presence inside... I broke the shop's shutter to get in. I'll have to apologize to Mr. Morikita and Lady Saori again."
"I'll apologize too... But more importantly..."
I scanned the area around us.
Thanks to Koharu's spell, my surroundings finally came into view. Without realizing it, I had been trapped inside a hemispherical darkness about thirty meters in diameter.

On the floor and inner walls of the hemisphere...
0523615476456877846784521785306902363627634275634786347236476490864...
Hundreds of millions of numbers ran densely across the surface, each digit repeating a series of incomprehensible fluctuations. As Koharu sealed the rift she had opened, the clusters of numbers each flashed in their own random colors. It was as if they were breathing mathematical formulas, sustaining this space...
"A pseudo-heterogeneous phase!"
This was a temporary heterogeneous phase space created by the Intermediary. An isolated world maintained by Void Power. Because it was directly connected to the heterogeneous phase, it amplified the Intermediary's Void Power.
What's going on? Ash should have executed the Intermediary...
Or are there other Intermediaries...
As she pondered this, the numbers on the floor began to swarm together. They covered Saori like ripples, swallowing her whole.
"Saori-san!"
But the numbers, after carrying her away somewhere, swelled up and, before our very eyes, formed something... It was a life-sized human figure...
Koharu took up position beside Kashizuki. But the human form made of numbers let out a dry, masculine voice.
"Too bad. If I'd had just a few more seconds, I could've used that woman to bring you down... You should thank Kashizuki for going out of her way to come back."
"You're..."
"But finally, I've cornered you. It took quite a bit of effort, but now we can talk one-on-one."
The materialized man said with a broad grin.
"I've been waiting three years for this moment."

【Phase.6: This Was Their Finest Hour】

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Ash Shogoin finally regained consciousness.
I still feel numb. Even sitting up causes me pain.
"What a blunder..."
The warehouse where Ash and the others were had suddenly been engulfed by a flood of numbers. Trapped within a closed space created by Void Power, everyone present had collapsed.
But looking up, the malevolent numbers were gradually fading, and the Domain Masters around them were waking up. Yet their faces were drained of color.
Ash helped his junior to his feet.
"Candidate Kataoka, can you stand?"
"Barely... but..."
"I know. This pseudo-dimensions has been imbued with Void Power that absorbs Domain Factors."
"Then you too, Captain..."

"It's not just me. Everyone here must have had their Domain Factors stolen. Am I right?!"
Seeing them nod, Ash gritted his teeth.
"Without domain factors, we're nothing more than ordinary civilians. It'll take eight hours for a full recovery. Immediately have the "Spirit Life' domain masters waiting in the rear perform healing spells..."
But as Ash stood up, he looked at the map of Nishihama's city streets and was stunned. Every light dot representing a domain master participating in the operation was showing zero remaining domain factors. Every single one of them had been neutralized. Soon, countless screams flooded the communication lines.
"Captain, this is the "Spirit Life' team on standby! We've been attacked by pseudo-anomalies—there are no Domain Masters left who can perform healing spells!"
"First Assault Team, residual Domain Factor: zero!"
"And the enemies inside the target area..."
"Enough. Leave me alone."
Clenching his fist, Ash growled.
"This Void Power is the same as the one that attacked Ryoto. Our enemy uses Void Power to steal Domain Factors, evades the Shogoin family's surveillance network, and is capable of luring us out and neutralizing us all at once. Don't underestimate them—their Sinner Rank is likely 15 or higher..."
Then Ash pointed to the only pseudo-anomaly remaining on the 3D display. Nishihama Station Front Shopping District... Café "Lapis Lazuli."
"I'm heading there! Fortunately, the Regional Headquarters is safe. Contact Sakakibara at Headquarters immediately! Issue an emergency call-up to the off-duty personnel!"
Mii-san rushed after Ash as he ran.
"Then who were those twelve people at the hideout...? And what about the other six...? Who exactly were we chasing?!"
Ash then brandished the individual identification data that had been brought in just before the raid.
"They're simulacra."

***

Right before my eyes, the man was smiling.
Outwardly, he looked like any middle-aged man you might find anywhere. He wore a worn-out suit. His hair was unkempt. His skin was dark, and he was on the thin side.
But his shifty gaze and brazen sneer exuded the arrogance common to those who have acquired false power. I glared at the man over Koharu's shoulder.
".....So you're the Penitent?"
"That's a bit rude, isn't it?"
The man clasped his hands behind his back.
"Manipulation of negative impressions is quite a nuisance. The lot from the Nine Realms take great delight in giving us such names. If I were to state my official title.....

Disruption Warfare-Type, Metamorphic Void Power User, Shinojima Geiku... my formal title is "Rusted Nail."

With that, the Penitent... "Rusted Nail' snapped his fingers. At that signal, the pseudo-dimensions vanished, and the scenery changed completely.

It was a nighttime coastline. A concrete seawall stretched straight out to the moonlit sea. And at the base of a rusted crane in the shipyard...

"Run, Uga-kun! Run!"

A voice filled with anguish. I couldn't believe it. It wasn't the kind of voice that quiet girl could produce.

But there she was, Morikita-san, clearly tied to the crane. Wrapped around her were thick chains used to moor ships. Even so, Morikita-san twisted her body and screamed.

"Please, run away with Matsushita-san! Right now, hurry!"

I was horrified. In Morikita-san's eyes, there was nothing but terror. On her cheek were marks from being struck...

At that sight, a roar burst from me without my knowing it.

"You bastard—aaah!"

My hair stood on end as I awakened my Domain Factor. The "Wise Eyes and Ears of Vine" locked onto "Rusted Nail", and with a sprint powered by the "Mighty Limbs of Salos", I closed the distance in an instant.

But "Rusted Nail" also drew a gleaming black P1640 automatic pistol. The thick grip held a double-column magazine loaded with sixteen rounds. And he held two of them, one in each hand. Thud!

"Step back, young master!"

A series of gunshots rang out. Koharu reacted to the flashes.

Shoved aside by Koharu, I barely managed to dodge the shots. Instead, a bullet grazed the tip of Koharu's shoulder. Fresh blood spurted out. I caught Koharu as she staggered.

"Are you okay, Koharu!"

"".....We can't let our guard down, Young Master... This Penitent is turning bullets into spiritual energy as well."

Indeed, Koharu was clad in the Level 2 "Penance" physical hardening spell, "Agares's Strong and Sturdy Armor". A spell capable of withstanding ordinary bullets with ease... which means that "Rusted Nail"'s illusory power surpasses Koharu's magical power.

"Rusted Nail" mocked our panic.

"Just as I expected from a "Penance' Domain Master. You've got some great reflexes."

"You...!"

"I'm complimenting you. I was hoping to finish you off with that."

Then Koharu regained her composure.

"He's a tough opponent, Young Master..."

"Don't push yourself too hard, Koharu."

"I have no choice but to push myself... This is an enemy I cannot defeat otherwise."

Dark blood flowed from her shoulder. Yet her eyes still burned with the will to fight. She refused to step back from me.

As if this were her place in the world...
"Rusted Nail" reloaded his magazine as well.
"That's right. I don't have the luxury of holding back my spells on you lot."
"What did you say?"
"Ah, sorry. I didn't tell you."
"Rusted Nail" announced with a dazed expression.
"We still have a hostage here."

***

The car heading south on the national highway bore the Shogoin family crest.
Ash, seated in the back, bit his nails in frustration at the Saturday traffic.
"The Penitent used a simulacrum. Anticipating that the Shogoin family would conduct a thorough search, they prepared someone who looked like the Penitent in advance."
"Someone who looks like the Penitent... what do you mean by that?"
Ash growled at Mii, sitting next to him.
"A corpse. When a human dies, their domain factors disappear. No wonder it wasn't in the database.
The Penitent made that corpse appear alive to lure us here..."
"Then this case is..."
"Ah, there's probably only one culprit. And he's incredibly skilled. How many of us do you think he incapacitated? Sixty-eight! Sixty-eight!"
Ash's handsome face twisted with anger.
"What's more, the Intercessor is a Rank 15 or higher who's proficient in both the V System, which manipulates immortality, and the M System, which manipulates matter. In comparison, Ryoto is a Domain Master with a tolerance of 7 who has a three-year gap in his training and has only mastered the first level of "Asceticism'... There's no way he could win!"

***

In an instant, my breath caught in my throat.
In the direction pointed by "Rusted Nail", several cranes stood side by side. At their bases, "Vine's Wise Eyes" spotted someone... prisoners nearly ten meters away.
"Ryō-chan! Koharu-chan!" "Ugami!"
"Yuri... Elhiko... why are you two here too..."
The two of them were chained to separate cranes. Yuri writhed in agony, her face etched with regret.
"I'm sorry, Ryo-chan..."
"I'm sorry... they took all my Domain Factors..."
I couldn't make heads or tails of the situation. Only "Rusted Nail" was smiling at me.
"It took some effort to corner you. After all, there are a lot of obstacles in the way. Kashizuki, the Uga-jin family, the Shogoin family, the school students... but if you use that to your advantage, it's easy to take hostages."

"You bastard..."
"It's fine to have a lot of friends, but that's for ordinary people. As a Domain Master, it's wiser not to create more of these kinds of burdens for yourself."
I closed the distance between us, inch by inch.
"So you're the one who attacked me at the entrance ceremony, too?"
"Yeah. I'm a Transformation-type Void Power user who alters reality... I changed the goalposts and the window glass to attack you,
and I altered the mind of a woman named Saori to seduce you. I even hid the fact that I was acting alone and deceived the Shogoin family."
"So the message that came from Ash was...!"
"That was a fake email I sent... in other words, Deception-type Information Void Power. What the Shogoin family was chasing was just a decoy... a corpse I was manipulating. Want me to tell you who it was?"
The "Rusted Nail"'s throat made a choking sound.
"You know, there are actually quite a few people in this world who, even if they were killed, nobody would care about. Homeless people, elderly folks living alone, runaway girls, people looking to end it all... They're all just practice dummies for my Void Power.
"Youuuuuu!"
The moment I screamed, my Domain Factors boiled over on their own. They raced through my body, urging me to cast a spell quickly. But "Rusted Nail" just let out a sigh.
"Well, I've put in all this effort. Now it's your turn, young master Uga-jin."
"You mean... me?"
"Neither the Shogoin family nor the Uga-jin family is coming to your rescue now. On top of that, I've got three hostages here. You've already lost. So please... hand over what I want."
"Rusty Nail" placed his finger on the trigger. Koharu suddenly spread her arms wide. I, too, braced myself, still facing the muzzle.
".....Do you want my life?"
"No. I want your past."
An unexpected answer. But the sneer had vanished from "Rusty Nail's" face.
"Tell me. Where are the two seconds the world lost?"
In an instant, "Rusted Nail's" voice echoed.
"Tell me... Everyone wants to know. What did you do three years ago... I came here to find out."
Faced with the question, my body stiffened. But "Rusted Nail"'s voice pierced my heart like torture.
"The first to notice were a very small number of Void Power users. When they heard that the son of the Uga-jin family had been hospitalized, they started investigating what had happened. I was one of them... but no matter how much I looked into it, I couldn't figure it out. Where you fought three years ago, and who you fought... there's not a single trace left. The only thing on record is that your retainer died. Isn't that right... Ryout Uga-jin?"

I couldn't even say no.
Meanwhile, Yuri and the others, still bound, stared at me in a daze.
"Ryout-chan, this story..."
"I don't get a single thing about this!"
".....Ugajin-kun..."
But the voice of the "Rusted Nail" grew even louder.
"Eventually, suspicions spread. They say you caused an incident so grave it couldn't even be kept in the Domain Archives—a scandal that proved you unfit to protect humanity. And there's even a rumor going around. That the whole thing took just two seconds..."
The Penitent ran a hand through his unkempt hair.
[.....]
"Don't you want to know what happened in those two seconds...? Besides, the only one who can cover up an Anomaly Incident is the Nine Army Commander. It's highly unusual for that Nine Army Commander to go out of his way to get involved. So this is the Gankou Incident that's been rumored for ages, right?"
"Yeah, I get it. You're saying I can't say anything. It is the Gag Incident, after all. But the rumors about you have already spread all over the world. And Void Users everywhere are desperate to know the truth behind the incident. An incident the Nine Army Commander is desperately trying to hide... Everyone suspects there's something to it. It must be a weakness of the Nine Realms... no, maybe it's actually..."
As I staggered, "Rusted Nail" flashed his yellow teeth at me.
".....Could it be the weakness of the world's strongest Domain Master, the Nine Army Commander? If so, we could expose the Gag Incident. It's only natural that Void Users all over the world would want to know, right?"
"The one who does might just be able to defeat the Nine Army Commander. If you have that kind of power, you could reign over the world as the King of Anomalies." The Rusty Nail's smile twisted with greed.
"Those two seconds you lost are equivalent to the Throne of Anomalies... That's why I started preparing months ago and reached you before anyone else. I'll make you remember, no matter what."

"Shall we help you remember?"
"What happened back then, huh?"
For a moment, the psychotherapist's words came flooding back.
But I shook them off and shouted,
"I don't remember a thing..."
"Oh? Amnesia, is it? "That's a pretty cliché excuse."
"Oh, amnesia, is it? That's a pretty cliché excuse."
"It's true, I...!"
"Never mind. It's a gagging incident, after all. It's only natural you've been silenced. But in cases like this, the best approach is to work on the subconscious. Though neither spiritual power nor a woman's seduction had any effect. So..."

The "Rusted Nail" raised his voice.
"I'm going to kill Shizuki and the hostages right now... If you witness the death of someone close to you, it might drag out your true nature."
True nature... my true nature...

I recalled the questions I'd asked myself over and over in prison.
What happened back then? Is whatever caused that incident that day still lurking inside me?
"Young Master!"
But I, too, roared at "Rusted Nail".
""Might'... Don't mess with me!"
Pushing away a worried Koharu, I fixed my gaze on "Rusted Nail".
"I don't need some half-assed treatment like that! If you're going to do it, do it right! I'm the one who wants to know the past more than anyone!"
Even a brutal Penitence Keeper is struggling with my true nature... Furious at that helplessness, I shook off my paralysis. Once again, the Domain Factor activated.
Then, "Rusted Nail" aimed the gun in his right hand at Koharu and the one in his left at Morikita-san.
"Can you stop me, little master of the Uga-kami?"
"If Koharu and I cast our spells, you'll have to defend yourself. You won't have the spare capacity to shoot everyone else!"
But "Rusted Nail" merely sneered.
"In that case... let's change reality."
In an instant, with a loud "Bam!" sound, the back of "Rusted Nail's" head swelled up. As if bursting, his head bulged outward from the inside. What appeared on the back of his head was a new face.
"Wh—!"
Both Koharu and I were stunned.
Furthermore, "Rusted Nail"'s suit began to warp before our eyes. New sleeves extended from his shoulders, and arms clutching pistols burst forth from within them.
In a mere second, "Rusted Nail" transformed into a monstrous form with two faces and four arms, as if he had become two people standing back-to-back.
"Remember, young master of the Uga-jin!"
The two faces chanted in unison.
"Face your past with my rough treatment!"
"Rusted Nail" aimed all four guns in completely different directions. All four arms pulled the four triggers. The targets were Morikita, Yuri, Elhiko, and Koharu... but...
Faster than the Penitent's movements, Koharu's right arm trembled. A speed only a "Penance" Domain Master could achieve. Yet my "Vine's Wise Eyes and Ears" had already detected the red spell light Koharu had cast.
Tribe Blade—Crimson Inferno Trident!
A massive three-pronged blade swirled, sweeping up the spell light. Propelled by Koharu's physical strength, the trident streaked through the air like a comet, trailing a tail of spell light.

"Kashizuki, what are you—!"

The "Rusted Nail" likely couldn't read Koharu's intent. But the trident soared through the air at breakneck speed, reaching Elhiko's restraints faster than the "Rusted Nail"'s gunfire.

It was a move that, if his aim had been even slightly off, could have injured Elhico himself. Yet the Crimson Inferno Trident didn't even touch him, severing the chains with a single strike. Sparks flew instantly. Elhico rolled away, fleeing. The bullets struck the crane, their impact hollow.

"Sorry!"

Having regained his freedom, Elhiko shouted.

But the Crimson Inferno Trident flew several more meters. Defying the laws of physics, it overtook the bullet heading toward Yuri from behind.

And it severed Yuri's bonds. This, too, was a millimeter-precise hit. Freed from her restraints, Yuri bowed her head and threw herself onto the concrete.

"That was close!"

The bullet exploded right above Yuri's head.

But the third bullet had already passed right in front of Morikita-san. It seemed impossible to intercept it... but just then, the Crimson Inferno Trident deflected the bullet itself.

"Gyaaaah!"

A bullet ricocheted at Morikita's feet, who was unable to move. But the Crimson Inferno Trident severed Morikita's restraints and finally plunged into the concrete.

A technique that could only be achieved by fully mastering a Domain Weapon... yet Koharu had thrown away her own weapon to save Yuri and the others. Then who is going to protect Koharu?!

"Get back, Koharu!"

Even as I shouted, it was too late. What's more, Koharu hadn't even cast a defensive spell. The Void Power Bullet from "Rusted Nail" easily pierced Koharu's arm, causing her slender body to twist violently.

"Koharu-chan!" "Matsushita-san!"

Yuri and Morikita's screams rang out in vain.

Then the next shot pierced Koharu's thigh. Blood spattered her blonde hair, and her leg buckled at the knee. Koharu, completely drained of strength... collapsed limply. I caught her body in my arms...

--Ah.

−It's the same... as three years ago.

I wished it were just a dream. But Koharu was truly drenched in blood. The scene was unbelievably similar. The smell of blood dragged me back into the past, whether I liked it or not.

"Why didn't you dodge, Koharu! At least cast a defensive spell!"

"Then I wouldn't be able to save everyone..."

"Koharu..."

"I saw where Yuri and the others were and realized it right away. They're too far apart... At that distance, I can't save everyone at once..."

"Don't talk so much. The blood..."
"To put it another way, I predicted that even if Yuri and the others were positioned far apart, the Penitents would have a way to wipe them all out at once. That's why..."
"But that doesn't mean you have to use yourself as my shield again..."
But "Rusted Nail" shot me a contemptuous look. "You haven't noticed, have you?"
"What do you mean?"
"That "Kashizuki" of yours is already drained."
I stared intently at Koharu's face. Though covered in blood, she didn't let out a single moan.

"Nonsense, Koharu is still..."
"Are you saying she hasn't used much of her magic? As expected of a spoiled rich kid from the Ryō faction, you're too preoccupied with yourself to have noticed Kazuki's condition. That girl's domain factor has been depleted for the past few days. Though, to be fair, I'm the one who caused it."
"So Koharu, you..."
"Back then, my Void Form stole that guy's Domain Factor through physical contact... and with that single blow just now, I used up what little Domain Factor was left."
I kept telling myself that couldn't be true. But in my mind, Koharu's words and actions played back slowly. "Thanks to being allowed to rest all day yesterday, I'm feeling much better."
"I'll do the cooking. Resting is out of the question."
"Please, don't pamper me."
It's a lie—all of that was a lie.
−It was all an act to keep me from worrying...
I wanted it to be just a bluff from "Rusted Nail". But Koharu remained silent. Her lack of rebuttal meant it was the truth... and in the distance, Yuri was nodding. The Domain Masters of the "Spiritual Life" can sense Koharu's residual domain factors.
I sat Koharu down on the ground.
"Did you think I'd be happy seeing you put on a brave face? I—"
"Young Master..."
"If I let you die like this, what am I supposed to tell Yota and the others?!"
But Koharu replied, her face drenched in blood.
"If that happens, please tell them I fulfilled my duty as your servant..."
"Koharu..."
"If I hadn't done this, I wouldn't have been able to protect your time, Young Master..."
The moment I took those words to heart.
Did you know, you...
−The thing I tried to protect more than anything else.
Koharu wasn't just reading the enemy; she was reading my heart, too. That's why she'd been protecting what was important to me all along.
That was the time I spent at school...
The time I spent talking with my friends.....
The time I spent drinking coffee alone.....
And even those two seconds I lost.....
That's why she tried to keep everyone at school away. That's why she tried to keep the teachers and the Gakuto Squad away. So they wouldn't get dragged into this with me.....
−To protect what's important, push what's important away.
−That was Koharu's optimal strategy.
−Koharu understood.
−What I wanted most of all.
−And yet, I.....

I'd been thinking it all along.
I don't need anyone to fawn over me.
I'm not even worth protecting.
But Koharu...

".....Don't mess with me."
I muttered to Koharu in my arms.
".....Just because I'm Kashizuki, there's no need to go that far. Even Dad wouldn't have given an order like that."
"...But Young Master..."
".....And yet, you went and protected everyone else too."
I felt an overwhelming sense of frustration.
I didn't come back to be protected.
I came back to protect someone.
And yet, I've just been protected the whole time...
"Remember, for God's sake!"
The voice of "Rusted Nail" reached me once more.
"Look, Kashizuki's about to die! This is what scares you the most, isn't it! You're afraid of losing someone close to you, aren't you!"
As I shouted, the world around me began to warp.
With a rumbling, a massive form emerged from the distorted space. A Void Attack Form equipped with machine guns and chainsaws... and not just one or two, but five, then ten, rapidly swarming together and closing in on Koharu and me.
"Rusted Nail" let out a furious shout.
"This is the worst moment for you, isn't it! Being unable to do anything, just watching your comrades die! But what lies beyond the worst! Remember that! Remember, remember, remember!"
The forceful words rang out like a broken bell.
"There's no one left to protect you anymore!"

"There's no one left to protect you.'
The psychotherapist's words resurfaced once more.
But I left Koharu behind and turned back to "Rusted Nail."
".....That's fine."
"What did you say?"
".....This isn't the worst time... It's a crucial moment!"
My fury was so intense I was practically roaring.
My defiance was laid bare before the Penitent.
My voice boomed like the roar of the sea.
"I've always known it! I don't want to lose anyone else! Not Kashizuki, not my friends! That's why I decided to protect them! When that time comes! When I'm about to lose someone again!"
My Void Form was on the verge of collapse. Yet my scream wouldn't stop.
"I won't break down at a time like this!"

Gigi-gigi-gigi-gigi.
Something creaked inside me. It was the sound of sharp metal scraping. Sensing its turn had come, it was telling me the time had arrived. The pre-programmed autonomous activation type...
The "Rusted Nail" had also noticed the disturbance.
"What do you think you're doing, at a time like this?!"
Without a word, I unleashed the light of the "Agony" spell from my right arm and the "Annihilation" spell from my left. As the spells roared to life, my hair stood on end and the air trembled. Koharu noticed the sheer scale of the magic I had unleashed.
"Young Master!"
I took a deep breath as well.
"This time, it's my turn to protect you!"
This is my repayment to Koharu. My gratitude for her understanding me.

In an instant, a tornado-like spell light swirled from my body. But it was neither red nor black... it was a dazzling, golden spell light.
"Why do you have that color...!"
Red from my right arm, black from my left... and now gold joined them... extending with a roar! The sea wind howled, and shockwaves spread out. The pressure was enough to force the "Rusted Nail" to retreat.
Then, the entity that had been latent within my body as a Domain Factor let out a roar and materialized.
"Wh—wh—!"
The "Rusted Nail", Yuri, Elhiko, and even Koharu were all left speechless.
In my hand appeared a weapon that was bizarre and massive, vicious yet majestic.
A superhuman straight sword with a one-meter-long hilt, a two-meter-long blade, and a total length of three meters. The broad blade was made of thick layers of rare and heavy metals. The blade was thick and bulging, and the tip was as wide as a guillotine.
It was a jet-black sword capable of handling thrusts, slashes, and blows alike.
The decorations around the bolt securing the hilt to the blade were red and gold. It could only be wielded by one possessing the "Vigorous Limbs of Salos"... This was my masterpiece.
"Fifth-level composite domain weapon: "Annihilation' + "Penance' + "Creation.' Materialization complete."
As I announced this, I pointed the tip at the "Rusted Nail".
"Its name is the Slaughter God's Shadow Blade."
Koharu stared up at it in a daze.
Yuri, Elhiko, and Morikita-san... perhaps the blade, trembling in the night breeze, looked to them like a demon god craving flesh and blood.
But the "Rusted Nail" flashed its four arms.
"You're surprised by a mere Level 5? My rank is 15. My Void Form is in a completely different league from your weapon!"
As soon as those words left his mouth, his Void Form lunged at me.

But aiming at the enemy closing in, I swung the Slaughter God's Shadow Blade horizontally. In that instant...

Wooooooooooon!

The Slaughter God's Shadow Blade, slicing through the air, emitted a strange growl. To me, it was a battle cry that stirred my fighting spirit. But to the enemy, it must have sounded like the death god's cackling laughter.

At the same time, a black wave of energy burst from the blade.

It was the Level 3 "Annihilation" individual attack technique, 〈Asmodi's Cruel Blade〉, compressed and infused into the blade—a technique of Asmodi, the Slaughter Domain Master feared as the King of Hell.

However, it was, after all, a low-level attack technique. Realizing this, "Rusted Nail" smiled.

"There's no way I'd be crushed by something like that..."

But immediately afterward, an explosion. The decoy that took the spell's brunt was pulverized, helpless to defend itself. "You fool!"

While "Rusted Nail" flinched, I swung the Slaughter God's Shadow Blade in a wide arc. I slashed to the right and swept to the left. With each strike, a roar erupted. "Asmodeus's Cruel Blade" burst forth from the blade, obliterating the phantom form.

"No! No!"

Gasping, "Rusted Nail" continued to summon with its four arms. But before they could emerge from the distortion, the phantom form was blown away by my strike.

And when the encirclement finally vanished... I leaped toward "Rusted Nail" and brought the Slaughter God's Shadow Blade crashing down.

"Aaaaaah!"

The "Cruel Blade of Asmodi" sank deep into the "Rusted Nail"'s right shoulder. Moreover, the spell's power showed no sign of waning; carried by its momentum, it pierced through to the back. At the same time, it severed the "Rusted Nail"'s right arm at the root, spraying thick, dark blood in a spurt.

"Guuuu

"For a third-level spell, it hit pretty hard, didn't it? But in reality, it's a fifth-level "Creation' weapon multiplied by a third-level "Annihilation' spell... that makes it a 15th-level attack."
"M-multiplied...?"
"Ah, it's not the standard additive formula. It's a multiplicative spell modification system. That's why I can go toe-to-toe with you, even at Rank 15."
The face of "Rusted Nail" twisted in astonishment. No wonder. It was a spell difficulty that I, with a tolerance of 7, could never have cast without the aid of a Domain Weapon.
I didn't deliver the finishing blow to the man who'd lost his arm; instead, I turned my gaze toward Yuri.
"Do you know the Shogoin family's phone number?"
"Y-yeah, sort of."
"Could you give them a call? Apparently, we've captured a Penitent alive."
When Yuri nodded, Elhiko also stepped forward timidly.
"Ugami, w-what am I supposed to do...?"
"Keep an eye on that man. He summoned that many Void Forms. I don't think he has the strength left to escape."
Saying that, I walked over to Koharu. In her arms, Morikita-san was trembling.
"Thank you, Ugami-kun... but... ....."
"Don't worry. With Saori's Void Power, Koharu is already neutralizing it. Now that the Penitent has exhausted his strength, he should be safe... More importantly, I'm sorry for causing you trouble again."
After bowing my head, I gazed at Morikita-san's face. Her face was a mess of tears. I think it was relief. Seeing that expression, Koharu whispered.
"Young Master, I have a request."
"What is it?"
"Morikita-san is trembling. It seems my embrace alone isn't enough..."
I hesitated for a moment. But then I knelt down and placed the Slaughter God's Shadow Blade on the ground.
"......It doesn't mean anything weird."
"Ugami-kun....."
"Sorry for dragging you into this. You probably shouldn't go to Morikita-san's shop anymore, right?"
"No way..."
Morikita-san grabbed my arm. But her words were abruptly cut off.
"Ryoto Uga-kamiiiiiii!"
"Gah!"
The "Rusted Nail" slowly rose to its feet and shoved Elhiko away with the two arms on its back. The Penitent pointed its sole remaining left arm at me.
"That's right, you shouldn't have come back to this world! From now on, you'll be targeted by Void Users all over the world! Until you remember what happened three years ago!"
"You bastard!"

Haru braced himself, but "Rusted Nail" roared even louder.
"And you still want to live in this town?! Are you saying you'll take advantage of everyone's kindness and don't care if they get dragged down with you?! That's incredible! You're not human! You're nothing but a self-righteous jerk who doesn't give a damn about human lives!"
Self-righteous. Self-righteous. Self-righteous. The words Sakakibara Kirka had once hurled at me stung my ears. But I, too, clenched the Slaughter God's Shadow Blade in my hand.
"Yes, I'll live! But that isn't self-righteousness! It's the "arbitrary judgment' of the "Arbitrary Battle Strategist'!"
"Hypocrisy that nobody wants...!"
"I don't care if I'm not trusted! I'll fight because I want to protect them!"
In that instant, an unshakable resolve surged through him.
"This is the one selfish thing I won't give up!"
But "Rusted Nail" also summoned strength into his remaining arm.
"There's no one in the whole world who'd accept your past or your present!
How pathetic, "Arrogant Strategist"!"
What was thrust before me was reality.
I had no words to deny it.
But before I could find an answer...
"Get down, Uga-jin-kun!"
Morikita-san stood up and formed a seal with her fingers. A faint green light burst forth from both her arms. She cast the "Star Training" spell, which governs the planets and manipulates the elements and nature.
"Furufuru's Thunder Angel!"
With her shout, the green light shot toward Rusted Nai｜ and transformed into a winged angel. It was a Level 1 individual attack—the weakest in power—devised by Furufuru, the Climate Domain Master known as the "Count of Weather." Yet Rusted Nail no longer had the strength to evade the spell. Its heart was pierced by the spell, and it fell backward onto its back.
With a squelch, the back of the "Rusted Nail"'s head—no, the back of its face—crashed into the concrete and crushed, spreading a pool of blood. As the Penitent breathed its last, Morikita-san turned to face me.
".....I can only use spells like this for now. But I want to be with you, Uga-kami-kun. Forever and ever..."
"Morikita-san....."
"This is just me being selfish too... And there's something I've been meaning to say for a long time... Thank you for saving me... Uga-kun."
Honestly, I couldn't believe it.
Morikita-san's words. That selfishness.
Even so, I stepped back from Morikita-san.
"No, I can't. Now that I've caused a incident like this, I can't go back to school..."
Just then, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I ignored it at first, but for some reason, Yuri smiled.

"Go check it, Ryo-chan. It's probably from everyone."
"Who's "everyone'?"
"Everyone is everyone."
Elhiko said the same thing, so I took out my phone. Even though I hadn't given my email address to anyone, I'd somehow received over a hundred messages. The messages read...
"Hey there. Uga-jin, how's it going?"
"Hope you can get back to school soon. Manami Hoshimura"
"Don't worry about the First District Headquarters."
"Let's go to karaoke once your suspension's over."
"I'm happy to be dragged into this. 32nd Sword-Drawing Combat Squad, Kondo."
"Is there anything I can help with?"
"Say hi to Matsushita for me, too."
.....I looked up.
Yuri and Elhiko were smiling. Morikita-san was still biting her lip.
And Koharu... Koharu was clutching her phone, too. It seemed she'd received a message as well, and she read it intently for a while. Eventually, she looked up and nodded silently at me.
I snapped my phone shut too.
I could probably just send a thank-you text, but since I'm here anyway, I might as well go to school, see everyone, and say something in person. The fact that I'm even worrying about something like this probably means I'm just a guy who's awkward with people.

But the person I want to thank the most is right in front of me.
Both "Rusted Nail" and the psychotherapist were wrong.
The person who protects me is right here.

***

The area around "Lapis Lazuli" had already been cordoned off by the Shogoin family. There were very few onlookers in situations like this; people were afraid of getting hurt.
Even so, Ash Shogoin honked his horn to clear the people spilling onto the road and stepped out of the black van.
"Sakakibara, what's the situation?"
"Reporting. The pseudo-anomalies in this area have already disappeared."
Sakakibara Kirka, who had arrived ahead of headquarters, reported in a cold, detached tone.
"One woman inside the store... Ms. Saori Morikita, the owner of this shop, has been transported to the hospital. She is unconscious, but her life is not in danger..."
"What about the person monitoring Ryoto's apartment?"
"Six... All confirmed dead."

In that instant, Ash let out a roar. He ignited the blue light of the 《Guardian》 spell in his fist and struck the car he had arrived in. The windshield shattered into dust, and the body of the car was crushed.
"Captain Shogoin..."
Mii, who had been riding with him, watched in anguish. But Ash regained his composure and asked Sakakibara.
"Where is Ryoto right now..."
"He's alive. I just received a message from the young lady of the Miroku-ji family. She said she executed one Penitent at the site of the former Otaki Shipyard along the coast..."
For a moment, Ash held something back.
"Cadet Kataoka, do you know Ryoto's cell phone number?"
"Yes, I'm the class representative."
"Please thank him for me. Tell him I'll definitely repay this debt..."
"Understood....."
"And I will definitely... yours... no, never mind. Never mind."
Leaving those words hanging, Ash quietly walked away.
Mii watched him go, then pulled up her phone contacts. But the first number she dialed wasn't Ryoto Uga's.

【Extra.Phase: A Mild Spring Day】

"Do you remember what happened back then...?"
A room at Nishihama Central Hospital. When I asked, Saori, lying in bed, shook her head.
"Umm... no, that's..."
"No... what did I do to you, Ryoto-kun?"
I couldn't hide my distress, no matter how hard I tried. According to the hospital's medical staff, they hadn't told her what kind of spell had been cast on her.
But I think that's for the best. Saori's heart doesn't need any more pain.
".....Don't worry about it. I'll forget."
"Thank you, Ryoto... Will you come visit me for coffee again?"
"Is that okay? I might end up being a bother again."
"It's fine..... Besides, Ryoto, I'm counting on you."
"..... Thank you."
I bowed my head and thought to myself. There was someone here for me, too.
Then I turned my gaze to the other bed.
Morikita-san had been sleeping the whole time, bathed in the afternoon sunlight. Her injuries were minor, but it seemed she was just exhausted.
I placed the bouquet of flowers I'd brought without waking her, and offered my thanks in my heart. Thank you. I look forward to another delicious cup of coffee.
"Oh..."
Then Saori pointed out the window.
"Anyway, look—you should go see him."

"I may not have the talent to be a Domain Master like Misora, but I can at least see through things enough to know the real reason Ryoto-kun came to this hospital."
She was pointing at the hospital courtyard. A single, towering cherry tree stood there.
Realizing she'd seen through me, I nodded.
"Please teach me that technique someday."
"When you're an adult."
I caught Saori's wink and left the hospital room. Then, as I calmed my mind and was about to head toward the courtyard...
"W-what the hell are you guys doing?!"
Startled, I stumbled back a meter.
In the hospital hallway, Yuri, Elhiko, Mii-san, and Dr. Izakaze were all lined up. What's more, every single one of them had their ears pressed right up against Saori's hospital room door.
First, Yuri approached with a puzzled look on her face.
"I came to visit Saori... but Ryo-chan... what was that conversation just now? "I'll forget about it,' you said?"
"Nah, nothing."
"But Uga-kun... According to Captain Shogoin, Saori-san was supposed to be..."
"Stop blabbing, Mii-san! You're the class representative, after all!"
Elhiko cut in.
"Hold on, everyone. I've got a brilliant proposal."
"I can say with absolute certainty that it's not brilliant, but I'll listen anyway."
"We use Miroku-ji's "Soul' technique to extract Uga-jin's memories. Can't we transplant them into me?"
Elhiko was shoved by Yuri and slammed into the hallway wall. Yuri then grabbed me by the collar.
"Tell me the truth! What kind of spell was cast on Saori? Don't tell me Ryo-chan took advantage of his... insatiable stamina..."
"Hold on a sec. Who said I have insatiable stamina?"
"I-I don't believe that! But everyone in class says Ryo-chan and Koharu-chan have been sleeping together for two weeks!"
"On the twenty-seventh floor? Are you talking about my room?"
"So it was true after all! Oh, I can't take this anymore... I'm checking myself into the hospital right now..."
"Miroku-ji, pull yourself together!"
..... I don't get it. Why is Yuri collapsing?
But just as I was wondering, Teacher Izuna Nagi approached me, clutching her magic staff.
"Ugami-kun, here."
"What is this..... A directive from the administration?"
"It's from Shogoin-kun. Your suspension has been lifted. With this, you can come to school as usual."
"Finally..."
"Also, there should be a note inside commending your achievements."

"Ash's a surprisingly polite guy, isn't he?"
"In exchange, I suppose it means the details of the incident are to be kept confidential. After all, more than half of the Shogoin family was incapacitated that night."
I slipped the envelope she handed me into my pocket and turned back to her.
"?"
"Doesn't it bother you, Sensei... ...to have a student like me in your class...?"
"It's true that you might be targeted by the Penitents again. But as long as they're users, all of our students are at risk of being attacked."
"But, you see, I..."
"Don't go thinking you're the only one who's special. I won't give you special treatment either. I want you to live your life as just another student."
It felt like I'd been hit hard on the back of the head.
Now that she mentioned it, she was right. Had I been thinking only of myself? I really am self-righteous.
Then the teacher wrapped her arm around her staff.
"Well, it's true that you're probably the most likely target in the whole school. But everyone knew that and accepted it anyway. That's not a decision just anyone could make."
"......I'm grateful."
"Eh....."
"Then why don't you express that gratitude to Miroku-ji first?"
"You didn't know? She wanted to help you, so she reached out to everyone in Class A and the upperclassmen."
Otozu
"That night, too, she was planning to visit your room but stopped by Morikita-san's shop first, and that's how she got caught up in the incident."
..... I was appalled at myself. Finally, I understood why Yuri had been captured. And why everyone's messages had been sent to my phone... Yet that idiot Yuri didn't say a word...
I walked over to my childhood friend.
"Hey, Yuri."
"What is it, you idiot Ryo-chan? Pervert. Womanizer. Just because you're going through puberty doesn't mean you have to do it twenty-seven times..." ....."
Ignoring her, I reached out.
I placed my palm on Yuri's black hair and ruffled it up.
"W-what are you doing, Ryo-cha...?"
Our eyes met for a split second as she started to speak. But I said nothing. That should be enough for a "Soul" Domain Master, right?
I turned my back on everyone.
"Well, I've got somewhere to go."
"W-wait, Ryo-chan! Was that just now... maybe..."
"If you don't keep quiet, I'll call you by your full name. "Namae Namae × × × ×,' you know?"
"Hey, do that again! Do it one more time!!"

▼Domain Factor, activated.
▼▼〈Salos's Vigorous Limbs〉 Auto-activated.
I ran out into the courtyard.

The large tree in the courtyard was already in full bloom.
The ground at its base was covered with cherry-pink petals, and Yota and Kaede were playing, scooping them up with their hands.
"This is amazing, there are so many!"
"Koharu-neesan, look, look! See, isn't it pretty?"
Kaede's hand sent the petals dancing in the wind. Bathed in them, Koharu sat quietly in the lotus position.
I, too, quietly stepped up in front of Kashizuki.
"You can really meditate in a situation like this."
"If I let my younger siblings disturb my mind, I cannot call myself a full-fledged Domain Master."
"But that outfit... "Are you Buddha or something?"
"This is what I must do right now. If I rest and recover my Domain Factors, I can return to my duties as Kashizuki."
"The doctor said you're not ready yet."
"My wounds have already healed."
"I can't trust your self-assessment. You hid the fact that you were depleted, too."
"But even you, Young Master..."
Before she could finish, Koharu shifted her legs from the zazen position to seiza. She had let slip a rebuttal unbecoming of a Kasuzuki. But having someone talk back to me is actually easier for me.
"The Slaughter God Shadow Blade. Sorry I kept it a secret. I made it while I was in the Antarctic Prison."
“.....”
"For the past three years, I've been learning "Creation' from scratch. I sold the weapons I made as practice to external Domainers. You know, that whole "contributing to society through prison labor' thing. Thanks to that, I've managed to save up enough to live on my own."
".....And that's how you ended up in a room like that....."
As Koharu looked down, I paused for a moment.
"So you knew about my case, didn't you?"
".....Yes."
"And that I don't remember it."
".....Yes."
"And that I can't bring myself to remember it."
"Do you wish to remember it, Young Master..... that incident....."
"Yeah, I do. I think it's terrible that I forgot it the very moment I lost someone so important. Isn't it my responsibility to remember?"
For the first time, I voiced the burden weighing on my heart. A resolve I couldn't share with anyone else. But why was I able to tell Koharu?

Then Koharu straightened her back.
"Please let me help you with that."

"Koharu....."
"I don't know what I can do either. But I will search for your past as well, Young Master.
No matter what lies there....."
And then Koharu said it.
"I will always be at your service, Young Master."
I scratched my head and took a deep breath to steady myself.

Could I really live up to that...? It was the first time I'd felt such warmth that it made me anxious.
But at the very least, I wanted to express my gratitude.
Without Koharu, I couldn't have won this battle. I couldn't have saved Yuri or Morikita-san. And above all, myself...
But telling her now feels unbearably embarrassing. Just five words are stuck in my throat. And for some reason, they're incredibly hard to say.
I took a deep breath. Finally, I managed to voice the first syllable.
"Koharu, a..."
"(Gyum)"
My words trailed off. When I looked down, Yukimi was clinging to my right leg. With a slightly annoyed look on her face, she extended her little finger from a fist.
"Oh, is this about that promise we made the other day?"
"(Nod, nod)"
The timing's bad, but I have to keep my promise.
But the moment I saw Yukimi, my heart froze. Honestly, I don't have the confidence to smile. I don't think I can regain in just a few days what I lost over three years...
Still, I casually stroked my face, massaging my facial muscles. It'll be fine. I practiced a little in front of the mirror, and I feel like I can manage a smile in front of Yukimi.
"So, how's this? (smile)"
"(wiggle, wiggle)"
Ugh... Yukimi shot it down immediately. Not only that, but she pursed her lips into a frown and even looked like she was about to get angry.
"That's weird...••••• How about this? (grin)"
"(wiggle, wiggle)"
"I-is this no good either... then, how about this? (smile)" "(wiggle)"
"How about this? (grin)" " (wobble)"
"How about this one? (smile)"
" (wobble wobble wobble)"
.....I've run out of smiles.
I guess it'll take more time to get back to where we were three years ago.....
But Yukimi made her displeasure clear and reached out both hands toward my face. Oh, well. I guess I'll have to bend down so she can reach me.
"(Gyyy

yy

"This whole incident... the "Rusted Nail's' plan was just too perfect. I don't think it was the work of a lone perpetrator."
"You think there's an accomplice?"
"Probably. And someone very close to us."
Amid the billowing steam, Sensaki's voice dropped.
"In any case, we'll keep an eye on things for a while longer. Waka will probably find it annoying, but we can't just walk away."
"That's Tsukasa-san's job, after all. But please keep an eye on Koharu, too. That girl is..." "I know."
Sensaki pulled the woman close.
""Shinchi' sees everything."
"That's all you ever say."
With a smile, the woman from Ryukoku kissed him.

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From: God of the Underworld. Subject: The Passing of Mr. Kugi.
"It's been a while. As you likely already know, Mr. Kugi has passed away. However, since he fulfilled his role as a decoy admirably, I would like to proceed to the second phase of the operation. Please let me know the situation on your end."

From: The Mimic Bird. Subject: Undercover.
"It's a shame about Mr. Kugi. For now, the parallel operation is a success. Everyone is so distracted by Mr. Kugi that no one is on guard against me. Of course, Ryoto Uga-shin is no exception..."

【Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa】

Nice to meet you, and it's been a while. I'm Takeo Ichikawa.
When writing this work, "Exert the Momentary", the first image that came to mind was that of "boys and girls going to school or stopping by a family restaurant while still carrying their weapons."
High school students with special abilities living in the midst of an unusual war... You might think that would make for a story that's nothing but serious, but even in wartime, I wanted to write a story where they simply enjoy their high school lives as normal (and in a way, resiliently), treating it as "that's that, and this is this."

I also wanted to create a "human tapestry" centered on the duo of Waka-sama and Shizuki, so I sprinkled in a wide variety of characters, from kindergarteners to grandpas. I hope you'll enjoy not only the mysteries surrounding the protagonist but also the interactions between these characters.

Now, the protagonist, Ryoto Uga-gami, is supposed to be a coffee lover, but actually, I don't drink coffee at all. I'm basically a tea person.

However, I thought it would be a stretch for a writer who doesn't drink coffee to write about a coffee lover, so to understand what "good coffee" even is, I decided to visit a wonderful, specialty café I'd found online.
But you know, when I thought about it, since I don't drink coffee, I couldn't really judge whether it was good or not. So I took a friend who's a coffee connoisseur to that lovely café, and he loved it so much he even said, "I want to live near this place!" Since then, I've been visiting that café myself from time to time and have started seeking out delicious coffee all over the place. I have to admit, I've really changed.

It took me a while to settle on the name "Kashizuki" for the heroine, Koharu's, title. While searching for synonyms among words like "attendant," "bodyguard," and "chaperone," I came across "kashizuku," and I was drawn to its somewhat reserved and gentle-sounding tone.
"Exertus" is also a word I found after endlessly poring over English-Japanese dictionaries; I thought its original meaning of "pushing or exerting power outward" would fit well with superpower battles. I agonized over and enjoyed coming up with neologisms like "Nine Realms," "Anomalies," and "Intercessors."

There's also the tragic story of a hard rock band with the same name as "Holy Land Savior," the story of a Russian chess champion I used as a reference for Koharu's character, the fact that Yuri's name is related to her grandfather's origin story, and the old man Soma who only appeared as a name... Phase.6 There are countless other stories I'd love to share—like the tragic tale of the hard rock band with the same name as "Holy Land Savior", the Russian chess champion I used as a reference for Koharu's character, how Yuri's name is connected to her grandfather's inspiration, the old man named Soma who only appeared as a name, and how the title "Phase.6" is both a quote from Prime Minister Churchill and the name of a wargame—but I'll leave it at that for now.

Finally, I'd like to thank SATO for drawing the illustrations.
When I saw the rough sketches, I was amazed at how perfectly every character matched the image I had in my mind. Thank you so much.

I hope to see you all again in Volume 2...

May 2009, at a lovely café in Fukagawa

Takeo Ichikawa